

DOCTORAL THESIS

stack

Minimalist Poetics

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stack: Minimalist Poetics

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

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Abstract

stack: Minimalist Poetics consists of a portfolio of practice-led research — a volume-length minimalist poem entitled *stack* — and a critical essay. The poem applies and adapts several minimalist writing strategies, which are evaluated in the critical essay to create a text that is rich in imagery yet indeterminate in meaning. In addition, *stack* is innovative in its structural approach — through original use of enjambment, footnoting and repetition, lines may be treated as discrete entities and, also, as combinations. A key research question that the practice-led component and the critical essay interrogate is the applicability and development of the poetics of the “New Sentence”, and other formally innovative approaches in the field of minimalist writing

The first part of the critical essay contextualises the creative portfolio in relation to the field of minimalist poetics as a whole. It sets out how *stack* belongs to a strand of minimalist poetry that evolved out of imagism and objectivism, and whose key practitioners include Robert Grenier, Robert Lax and Aram Saroyan. Subsequently, the thesis outlines the methods that were used to generate the creative portfolio. Effectively these latter sections present a manual for making minimalist poetry. Aside from exploring the written elements of *stack*, the thesis also examines my practice of conducting what I refer to as ‘minimalist interventions’ (embodied, micro-actions). These interventions, which have taken place in a range of environments, generally function as stimuli for the written aspects of the poem.

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stack

rocks¹

walked into a bar

didn't a roof

i was holding a bit

i had a broken bit of skirting

stair-rod too

a loud bang

a red big bus

morning following early

rocks¹

on a rock

a hedgehog

leaves

comes

sellotape

a huge thing

i like to walk in a field

the skys

lime

o'clock

leaning next to a grapefruit

bought an electrical item with the wrong lead

crushed a snail

talking to a brick

thinking about a shed

some times a month

bird||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||||no bird

three | square | alarm | clocks

white green blue

white | green | blue

green white blue

rocks¹

piglet jumping

glass twix

9 petals

turned the sound down on a video, minimised the tab and left it running

9 hours and then started another one

1 rocks

shouldn't i be outside watching a snail

what have you got there for lunch

to use paint but not make paintings

jug¹

two buddhas make same soup

one makes it differently

the sea is blue

white green blue

the sea is blue

green white blue

my hat is yellow

little birds can be brown

that little blue bird is brown

that little bird *is* brown

i moved a seat

no fox¹

i sat in the wind on a 10-ft rock and dropped a big blue ball

she danced on a box named d4

ambivalent sensations with a tiny orange cube

with electric fans behind her hair

a theatre of orange plastic biscuit tin lids

a room of oracles

no fox¹

charlotte re-finished the sculpture

aerial view of meteor crater, arizona

intergrown pyrite cubes

secret square with one line drawn

what is more than 'i had painted a twig'

it's the caravans i like in the picture

a pot near the top

sideways on to a lid

a photo of you eating lunch

a picture of me saying all the tobacco's run out

a pebble and a red moon

a man holding an electrical box

looked at a dustbin

a patch on a tile to the right

a girl standing next to a yellow stripe

charlotte re-finished the sculpture

a paintbrush by the shore to represent a painting of a paintbrush by the shore

through a flap into a silver room

hovering oblongs

those two are the most important bollards to me

a lemon painted yellow

walked the beach alone saw a courgette¹

goes out for hotdogs

at a total mountain and two boxes

low / orbs / birds / threads

a pile for lemon and lime skins

a woman just walked past carrying a bag

a pile of lemon and lime skins

the photo of it is in a box in the attic

and i got up

predictably we are sitting by a box

so i got up

wrote about a small pigeon

after drinks

ice

tess or like tess

a witness to a lemon on a slag heap

hit leg on that ledge

after lunch

ice

tess or called tess

something like a curtain

at a whereabouts

i have painted some string as close as possible to a cucumber

she smiled

at a packet of beef

went near a bench

saw a bicycle

in a shop

a man did not trip up in front of me

i have been in a room again

lifting a lid

i knew a patch

wanted to put a leaf in a box

when you stand on this square you become immortal

a sponge tubbed

enough beak for you to notice it as beak

a decision in four cushions

framed by a gap

hidden by three string bits

i tried to put a lid on a cup but i missed

a lot

then two squares coloured in

four tiles

three donkeys one elephant

1000 goats

walked around with bells

walked around without a blue pen

important yellow patch under total glass floor for adoration game

tummy flat legs up and crossed hands and elbows propping up head

left one felt tip in the pot

one felt tip in the post

left one pot in the felt tip pen pot

a felt tip sealed in an envelope with a postage stamp unsent

four places

four pink caps

four more places

four pink caps again

four pink caps again

four more places again

i thought it might be a good idea to do a drawing of some blue tac

the roof of a shed

rocks¹

in the top room it is a pleasure

learned about a dog wastebin

should i had a nectarine before i go to bed

listened to a buttercup

attached two stickers

two dots

9 lines

computer stuff in a computer bag

day old lime cake was a story about a cracked cd case

a fondle in the replenishment area

hotel room when climbing over a fence

heather-fall

that is to say i could see crystals in a weather-beaten box

used a felt tip pen

compare 'where'm i gonna put this half pack of batteries' with 'where did i put that half pack of batteries'

a reaction to a pink line

the same eucalyptus

a feeling towards plastic

meditation on sulphur, calcite and stibnite

went humbly by a leaf

by the cold of the moon

a pile of grass sticking out

i carry this secret to the grave

impossible exercise with ball

the drawing shows an amount of people by a bag of apples

didn't do what was possible with some bark

i saw her pencil on a tile

i saw her eat a lime

behind a wall

with a t-shirt

frontways to a beach

i have been in a car in the snow

a conversation whilst throwing sellotape

come round this bin

deja vu on a bit of plastic

looked at a dustbin

singled out a box

is a rusty pan filled with what looks to be petrol

was a deep orange canvas called yum

pigtails and mushrooms

on a bicycle bridge 4.20 was light blue to very light blue

walked up a mountain

on and on

a repeat of that walk under the pergola

a photograph of your expression as you exit the store

one and one

i'm at home wearing new trousers and making intuitive drawings

oh such a lovely

roof

three oblique forms (february)

one and two

what is box

what is more i had painted a twig

what is that water jug for

two and one

mountains at last

she caught me off-guard with a pair of beige trousers

already no more still here

the scent of a crab inside a rum and coffee

'the scent of a crab inside a rum and coffee' is simply another way of saying
that a bald tyre is a rectangular blue polyfoam

like the way i was outside mike's autos

turkeyfatsnow

something found behind a stack of palettes

come round this side of the bin

something i found behind a stack of palettes

a coaster may seem outdated but what if it had a nice picture on it

8 plastic cubes marginally misaligned

a bulb of pears

when towel bulb damp

an infinite amount of things in a finite system

a blink of gloam polished to a cigarette

i met him the following week

with a damp towel

10.34 train leaving

1 am lake

3 am

thing on plinth

sparrow beats

singing by a lid

by an until

look at that shed

next to a lid

red aurora

a translucent bee

a bridge

a pack of embassy no.1s

20 identically coloured blocks in 20 different pots

in the dream the chair had been moved

a bit¹

this bit is a called a carpet

a bit¹

a blue glass ball

study of blockie

lime off cairn

this time the moon

a little bit

butterflies

blue poison dart frogs

in the morning both sing

a picture of the hut

six irregular forms

mostly a box

conversation with magic square sequence

white marble form on frosted with brick

at a slope down to a bit

varnished butternut squash

two electric boxes

three toothbrushes sinking in a can of day-glo orange paint

hut in the woods

hats on a barge

white . green . blue

footpath .

light lights

tiger

four chairs

a wall a orange

i cleaned a bowl

a retrieved object (an oblong)

i move towards the stapler and look at it

concentration on a his and hers mug

i saw her again

.

being intimate with a brick

four huge colourful planks

plinth

beside me

a set of small beads

cups

pink cat on black

openwindowbrickslampshade

red shiny skip

i like the look of those old boxes

i saw a man with a bag of bread

second movement round an imaginary miniature lemon

sitting

i noticed her about that lid

moving

1

sun : hazelnut

moon . raving

moon . still

a simple set of poles in polystyrene

yet another little wooden bridge with neon blue

in some woods

red with lamppost

a pot off the top

sometimes i have beach

teaspoons

come round this other side of the bin

20 differently coloured blocks in 20 identical pots

singled out a bench

what is meant by painting a brick

bird to consume

taking something out of something too quickly

painting a teabag

we all had a good look at the orange table

we all had a good laugh at the orange table

this is a hatch in one of your old buildings

where stones are set amongst thousands of other stones

act 1: marcel duchamp

act 2: carl andre

mountains are high

rivers are wet

had a couple of beers

a continuity from blocks

vhs and technology boxes haphazardly

vhs and technology in a stack

how do you choose a brick

or whether a curtain

an object a day how much

room with a packet

room with a electric fire

room with a block

some tuna on the floor

looked at a tub

blue sun on yellow sky

returning to the bucket i noticed a leaf

greener damper summer

tables

some noodles with a bit of tuna in it and a bit of fluff

one left in a 10 pack

that star is called something different

by a pack of ham

a white round room with red, yellow and blue curtains

when you stand on this square you become a bird

tuna in a dustpan

a hairdressers that is shut

a family chicken bucket which is served

a glass hi-fi cabinet door that won't quite shut with a tab

a computer monitor on a landing

a bit of plastic near a pigshed

drawing a circle with a straight line

soundtrack for man handing rental keys back in

the phone directory was in the hallway

i'd like to do a drawing of you with some aa batteries next to you

space for a thumbnail drawing of a donkey

half blockie on the side of an ordinary path

in the gallery

blackbird

dabs

bicycle barrier

a place in a place to make it not that place .

electronic bells over a rock

i enjoyed being round at your house

near not daylight

drew a glass of apple juice

secret gesture with an stick

someone gave me a slip marked 'five red apples'

i forced her to look at a three-pin plug

at a grass touching experience

block . pillar . slab . beam

the day we did that role play about a clothes horse

standing next to a biscuit

four journeys round a box

was a girl crouching down looking at something in the grass

a bit

coffee throw

i drew a line at a beaches

representation of a project involving red yellow green and blue

it is possible to throw some grass up in the air

i stood next to him a bit

at a swimming pool

i liked that bit of plastic

more mountains

colour successions like red-yellow-blue

some doors piled up

i stood by some one-foot wooden blocks

moved my hand slightly

not in a box

by a tub

secret code for kerb slabs

in a sports hall there is a bit of fluff

nudged a chair leg

hid a stone on top of another stone

moved a piece of tissue next to a column a bit

wittered to a hedge

she shocked me by a shed

that plank is a bit rough

17, 16, 15 (sunk), 14

cups

put myself in position of i was wearing a bright red baseball cap cycling by a
bright yellow field

experiment with doorstopper

five clear acrylic cubes on paving slab

left the potato masher out in the garden overnight

posed as a girl selling strawberries at market

electronic puffs falter earliest to a part beach

red red blue

invention of blue metal bar

a mime about tilting a pack of compost slightly

stage curtain with a pushing motion

no block red shining

a boulder can show you another boulder then it's gone

files called 12 and 14 ways of not looking at a tub

around a piece of brown wool

yellow patch on total blue

rubber protective wire casing sample on display board

party with a log

i saw a girl wearing a scarf in the bank

a drape is an association

a field is near a public telephone box

adjustment of quantity of water in bucket (for *bucket composition 2*)

i watched

a party without a log

on a beach

with a formation

sunset in this place is even stronger

a sink bracket but only a bit

arrangement of cuboid acrylic rods orange orange orange blue

orange orange orange orange blue

2-cm chimpanzee model on 3-ft plinth

fluorescent brick in blacked out room

design for two ashtrays

at a graduate or corporate fair

i went over to the garage for some snacks

a yellow scrap may be of importance

she gave me a towel to use in the bathroom

i saw one of those bins they attach to a lamp-post

seafrontstarfruit

curtain

partly using a sink bracket

a system of black dice-sized cubes between different things

iron frame with orange tinted glass rectangular box 12X1X1

work in four parts a brick a path a sky a storm

clark coolidge is a found word from clark coolidge's 1967 collection *clark coolidge*

wasn't a bucket by the shed

wasn't i with a bucket by some flytipped rug

the her wastebin

i saw a cracked cd case against a sun-lounger

went left then forwards then right then forwards and so on vanishing each
time a sideways move occurred

sparrow chrome pole things

lemon . yellow

behind the wall there is a box but you can't see it

three birds a magpie a pigeon a seagull

snowflakes i climbed to a vantage point

a piano only outsidings melancholy

8 balls

got to the same distance as him with a tub

the first 1000 google images of yellow paper cups 28/4/13

you're not allowed to go on that bandstand

a decision to remember all of them which way up

wood with a piece

big cabinet

string thing scudged with bollard

four lights

red purse

with a packet of rice

a thing that goes back a bit

yellow partly

three birds

a magpie

a pigeon

a seagull

fold up chair

four nights

stops¹

almonds

two green table tops wrapped in cellophane

a room with only a bit of red

four yellow rods

plastic structure with painted string and china piece

four people in a line

two women

orange glass lid for covering cheeses

¹ stops

glove compartment

mud on each part

it's a really exciting place with wooden things

table with no plum

out the back / in the snow / there is a guitar

[illegible]

i bought a candle at the shop

two clothes horses

a house

i met him with a carrier bag of leeks

red

twig and plastic exercise

a bit of plastic

almonds

cement bags left

orange pot

later then about

transparent orange, red and blue, all look right in any order

how is a small plastic set against the landscape

i went for a walk on a tuesday

steam . . .

a pie dish left out

a row of plug sockets bracketed against a white brick wall, two sockets with
plugs in (second and third in from the left)

a table which is almost unusable due to wetness

red shiny magic box

a sellotaped cube sequence

a bird in the tree a sun

how is this shell next to this other shell

a room with lots of flowers in it

a lot of rice

motorbike and man holding yellow patch next to it for photo

16 t-shirts

a box that opens up and contains a colour

a bit of rock

green china

a mat

sky

rocks¹

yellow black

put a wrapper on my bed for second that i found inside

yellow black

a shower fitting two thirds up

17 years since

a string of rocks

there is a problem with an envelope

raininglight

a brick

i placed a spoon on top of another spoon and it fell off

i coloured in a whole sheet of standard white paper in blue using a blue crayon

darklight

i tried to focus on a thought of a carpet and it worked

in the chair

some blue tarpaulin covered a bit of grass

18 plastic boxes variable sizes with lids clipped shut filled halfway up
with cotton wool on a six-tiered shelving unit: metal x-bracket / plastic
coated hardboard, with wooden look finish

four white wooden spinning discs on a floor turning four glossy painted
bricks (blue red yellow green) back and forth 90° it takes two seconds for
the turn, at intervals of two minutes

i remember reading joe brainard during the week in the comfort of my own
home at a decent time of the day

went walking

behind a sofa

woods/woods

14 years since

i sat in a chair

i saw an organ when a beach

a room with a box in it

in a row three small metal balls a cube of wood a piece of plastic shattered
from a milk-crate

i remember reading joe brainard during the weekend in the comfort of my
own home at a decent time of the day

a dog

three taps

blue and red and, between, two other colours which could also be blue and
red

a train

examine the difference between a blue plastic put next to me and placing
myself next to a blue plastic

a disc the wrong way round

two yorkshire terrier figurines

a video of a woman's walk from a piece of yellow plastic to a piece of orange plastic

light blue painting

big orange case which stores bright orange disc which is missing

a rock . . .

in the snow / out the back / there is a guitar

i painted a square red then blue then red again

it is impossible to have an artwork at an airport

five red marbles one of which is unnecessary

47 pigeons

the first 1000 google images of big rocks

i went out

set up a stall for afternoon tea in my house with no one there, no drinks, no food, no tender, no chairs, no table, no music, no cake-stands

i looked for a section of the glass

great point in a swimming pool place

a room with a clock and a sofa how would i approach it

a pot turned the wrong way up

take a look at these three oranges

i only came for a box

three rocks that don't take up much space

on a table

deep white catering tray KB3

i decided to take another look at the orange couch

dropped my fork on the way to the curtains

hops around 30

synthesized piccolo to a window

no bucket amongst many buckets

piglet frolicking

rocks on rug

inside a shed

faces

took a golf ball to work

lemon

—

8 years since

we did it by a mirror

the rectangular bits are gone

went to different places in the house for a break

two trees

two more lids

i arranged a box

a rock that goes on a bit

green china lamp base

we all had a good lift of the orange table

hole in skirting board for television wiring to pass through

two rocks

walked past 34 stacked chairs and unstacked one of them

i put my hand up near a plastic box

we did it in the park

tripped over a brook

octagonal yellow ashtray

near a bush

15 years since

throughed

leaf sizing

tea | bags

there is no space round something on a wall

a tub the same size

43 accessories

grass near a late entrance

going upstairs i was puzzled

should i count each step a unit

rocks¹

the snow fell in a place

i sat down in the grass

1¹

restored an object

i lifted a box

fell asleep with a cube

fountain (a nice one)

i drew a fox in the same box as a duck

i can feel my arm

two jugs

i saw a fountain on a beach

next to some stones

lots of beach

wood

a piece of metal

outside a bottle

rocks¹

slipped walking up a ramp

a room with some flowers in it

i went into a room and had a look about a bit

two sticks represented a chinese gondola next to a mountain

drum machines apart

two doorstoppers

one rock on a rug

oblong a quarter and three quarters

lengthways

red patch against blue sky

a long room once

orange cloth slightly

i saw an organ with a bench

cup accident

a one and a half litre bottle of shampoo

pink

brick / paper / pen / amounts

a tree or thereabouts

two windows

three surfaces

a forest in the woods

i have opened this box for you

in a quarry

stopped

by a laptop

a lager can in half

shoddy but not in the mud

a re-enforced box

a set of tubs

a hut of sex

the same thing with the door

stood

on a step

a photograph of a tiger-striped bin

a photograph of a someone in a kitchen

stopping

jumping

in a field

put on an apron for the day

no one knows where the egg is hidden in the house or that it's in the house
or that it's hidden

the first 1000 google images of nice tubs

a pink line thickly

a rock

i put myself in front of a trowelhead

i went up to him and said 'butterfly'

rocks¹

a butterfly

three clear perspex cubes in their foam spaces

yellow and plank

balls

green green green

a sheet of glass with little wooden balls on top

out the back / there is a guitar / in the snow

i have only given you this red square from four

a bicycle and bucket dismantled

a box for only 10 seconds

a visit to a shop selling plugs

i wrapped up some plastic for unwrapping later

i got a nice bird colouring in and did it in brown

at first it was too hot then it was not

27th...

alex

drank

tea

heard the crickets

saw a swallow

lids everywhere

i did something on a desk

it felt clear it was not a tub

rocks¹

goat and cricket

balls going round

two blue rods against two blue logs

four rocks in a kind of V

1

i asked a friend if i could push him for a plum

rocks 2.30

fence 3.31

ridge 3.43

two plastic rods against two plastic logs

three greens

five grass away

absence of butter

round a corner

i danced with an apple

i walked over to his house to have a chat with him

we looked at a tree

touched a yellow mat on the floor

4 forks

1 knife

6 beers

no wine

i threw the last one away

a gilt framed photo of having an altercation with

a nice step half a mile away from a hardware store

a set of chairs but less

a part of that fence is 20 cm long

no lifting of the brush in the paint a buddha competition

i touched a bath

wet chickens

pens

a thing that appears which is never removed

rocks¹

¹rocks

two green tubs

slide

i rolled a wooden cube on a rock

arriving there was only one box

brick for brick sculpture

1^{rocks}

man tripping as he lifts a yellow box

two days with a piece of wood which has piece of wood written on it

an egg hidden swapped in an the eggbox

not enough glass on a fence 8 hours on

house north wales

we all had a good laugh with the orange table

25 red, 16 light green, 12 purple, 10 yellow, 8 dark green, 7 black, 8 brown,
9 blue, and 10 orange

three minutes by some off-cut lino timed by a stopwatch

i asked a friend if i could push him for a plum

i defaulted on my arrangement and only used three

an achievement in four stages

an arrangement outside on a table

by a crabshell

between 30-50 yellow lines

the ball stopped moving

i drew a picture of a red patch and filed it

i asked a friend if i could push him by a plum

i sat with him by a box

come and sit by this crate with me

as soon as i sat on the palette i smashed it up but then i saw a bus

red yellow green and blue follow in more or less that order

one of those long ones

one between five and ten

a lamp with stickers

i asked a friend if i could push her for a plum

lickingraining

3kg

two dogs

lime¹

lemon²

pavement³

too many objects round a piece of plastic

there is a guitar / out the back / in the snow

table with four chairs

a box

lemon¹

lime²

pavement³

halfway down

in about the middle

two bricks gathered up and moved towards a table

i drew 1000 amazing images of teal

i went for a walk on tuesday

hid behind a thing

table exclusion

this plum starts here by this fir tree

stones

large jars

tab for glass cabinet coming off

a fantasy on a log

put a wrapper on my bed for a second that i found outside

what's inside that box

reconstruction of a plate

limping by a nut

that pole is by something else

i used a log with him

by those big white containers

buckets and chairs

4 forks 1 knife 6 beers no wine

i ate a grapefruit at a rock

red,yellow,green,blue,

i set up the piece of paper

i asked a friend if i could push him as a plum

broken and unbroken rocks

at marked lines there and there i consecrated a line

chairs

standing too close to a lift

yellow or blue but never at the same time or in quick succession

i had someone hold an axe up for me, then place it on the mantelshelf

i got a bit of glass caught in the sole of my foot

i took it out

a set of office blinds (orange)

a tub between

a screw top the side of

a shed

new hinge old bucket

i went towards a leaf

half in a yellow acrylic mesh lying sideways two thirds down head out

establishment of stars

boys think about bark

wood with a stamp

i felt the underside of a slate whilst

a leaf to the door

i went in and out of the shop

i went to the record shop and then on to a friend's house

fiddled with my keys differently

three cars

an extra lid

stairs

the mountain

says an expensive plate

a plum atop a lidded tub

i still used a drawer

and licked a shoehorn

and tubbed a lid

the radiator was detached

parallel to a diagonal benson of hedges

went to a different place with the same dustbin

event at a large memory foam pet bed leaflet

a box that couldn't be moved on the fourth occasion

8 x the white bird, 4 x the dark hill, 2 x the dark sea

only two stones on the table today

i had it near you

by a motel

i will do that gesture with you in five days' time

again

wooden bits a tub

i walked around a tree the wrong way

i searched around for my keys on the table

i had a thing

near a bit

for a minute and three seconds

then i went back into the room again

near a bit

a small foam falling a short distance

large white catering tray KB5

a mountain does not move

rope window

i did a space with a chair

with a bit of something

i didn't eat a biscuit by a window

with a beautiful clock

i bought a packet of cigarettes for her

white blue gold

a lid including a rotating office chair

we were about to walk down a ramp

bath

almonds

yellow

sofas

a polar bear, a lake, a mountain, the sun

the polar bear is looking at the sun

sun

suns

i pretended i was performing a play in a hut

stars¹

a bit of rubber tubing

with 29 other things

white white blue

a painting of two bricks from *equivalent viii*

what does that 'twisting' motion represent

i tried to walk towards a cheese sandwich

for five minutes

tubs used in different ways

over the edge of a glass covering

a bit to the left

i organised some people round to do a painting of a lawrence weiner statement

i organised some people round to do a painting of a mike nelson statement

brick throwing competition

on every staircase at some point

a bit of space to get through

into a house

two images of blue

a yellow sponged

a new message coming through to a duck

i left a bit of my lunch

i asked a friend if i could push him with a plum

i've got a cauliflower here what should i do about that

walked through his zone of bin (the ashtray bit on top)

a box on top

a pot for what

a pot

three windows

a painting

imagining a match

rock and | rock

tea spoons a duck

fetching

a carpet

two trolleys

somewhere in london

a great thing in half

a picture of an attendant telling someone to stand back a bit

a shed roof

a pipe in fact

somewhere in london

white green blue

half a pencil

tights around the floor with a bit of music

sideways to a beach

a cup around the back

i think it's about time you got rid of that box

a page with cuckoo written down around 10 times

four actors required

3 o'clock

no sea

only sea

i did a lead pencil drawing of white green and blue

ducks

green white blue

the sea

on the left

on the right

a machine round the back

a pool of water

worked out a plan by a duck

i drank a cherry coke by two bins two miles apart

two on top of a lot

the fifth mushroom was hot

three cherry cokes

took the lift

20.....30.....40.....50cms away from a rock

toys got between a fence

i took a teaspoon to work

a tub full of plums

a sculpture

it's an otter

blew three things in a water-filled box

followed a drawing of a fox

followed a leaf by walking away from it

in a wood

water . a bird . a leaf . rocks¹

a tub for a change

that towel isn't the right one

two rocks on one rug

i couldn't sit on a ledge with him

near a chain

a decision to forget all of them which way up

stack: Minimalist Poetics

INTRODUCTION

stack: Minimalist Poetics is a critical exploration of my volume-length minimalist poem, *stack*, considered in relationship to minimalist poetics as a whole. There are two fundamental aims to my research. The first of these is the creation of an original minimalist poem, illuminated by a critical essay, one that offers a thorough review of the methodologies that were undertaken. The second aim is to produce a framework for a particular strand of minimalist poetry in which *stack* is included. I argue that this strand of minimalist poetry has its origins in imagism and objectivism, and became fully fledged around 1960 through the work of poets such as Robert Lax, Aram Saroyan and Robert Grenier, and has subsequently been developed by others to this day.

In terms of the critical essay the most logical way to commence is by tackling the second of these aims first so that the reader may discern what I mean by ‘minimalist poetry’, before I examine the nuances of *stack*. Chapter 1 is entitled ‘Minimalist Poetics: (More or Less)’. In the chapter I describe and explore one possible genealogy of minimalist poetry. Aside from recasting the variously attributed minimalist motto ‘less is more’, I have used this title to indicate that the chapter offers a rounded view of the origins and agenda of minimalist poetry, yet also to acknowledge that a consensus view is unlikely. In addition, minimalist poetry is an area that has received little critical attention, and one of my central research questions is an attempt to rectify this gap in knowledge by consolidating and building on the limited amount of research that has been conducted previously.

In Chapters 2-5, the remaining chapters of the critical essay, I foreground the methods that I have used to generate the creative portfolio in the context of minimalist poetry. In addition

to using methods traditionally associated with poetry I have also used methods that are often associated with other arts practices such as theatre and performance art. It is by now an established academic practice to term methods that are more closely associated with other disciplines as ‘cross-disciplinary’ or ‘cross-genre’. However, in relationship to my work, this label is one that I have reservations in using. Either of these terms suggests that the methods which are used to create poetry are not fully integrated. My understanding of contemporary poetry — indeed poetry since the start of the twentieth century — is one in which a highly diverse range of methodologies are regularly used without any sense of ‘mixed’ practice. I therefore consider all of the methods that I have used in *stack* as being concerned with poetic practice.

Chapter 2 explains my practice of conducting minimalist interventions — instances of minimal modifications to the environment and/or self, in terms of action or time. In most cases the process of conducting minimalist interventions preceded the process of writing and hence it seems logical to discuss the two core creative methods in the same order in the thesis. However, both in *stack*, and the critical essay these two methods remain in dialogue, and so, at times, are also examined in conjunction. In addition, a large majority of the interventions concern walking practice — the creative portfolio and the critical essay explore the politics of conducting such practice.

Chapters 3-5 explore three writing methods. Chapter 3 examines ‘textual attraction’. Textual attraction is a model for reading literature devised by contemporary linguist Peter Stockwell. He argues that certain types of language may attract and sustain the attention of readers. In the chapter I explain how I inverted the notion of ‘textual attraction’ (when writing) by employing the types of language that Stockwell says attract and sustain reader attention. Chapter 4 explores enjambment. The poem is unwavering in its basic line structure — after

each line a gap follows, followed by another line, then a gap and so on. All lines begin with a lower-case character and none have punctuation at the end. Most of the lines represent the minimalist interventions that I discuss in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 I go on to describe that, as *stack* is lineated in the way I have just noted, the lines may be read as discrete units yet, through a range of types of enjambment, a variety of other modular units are suggested. Lastly, Chapter 5 examines two cross-referential methodologies — creative footnoting and repetition. As with enjambment, cross-referential methods can also generate a range of possible modular units and alternative means by which *stack* can be navigated.

As with any PhD it is vital that the key research questions are kept in focus. I have therefore omitted some lines of inquiry. As the field of minimalist poetry has had limited critical attention it is beyond the scope of this study for me to consider it in relationship to other types of poetry that share a family resemblance such as concrete and conceptual poetry, Fluxus and Oulipo. For the same reason I only pay passing reference to the connections between minimalist poets to artists who use similar textual and embodied practice as this would immediately give rise to divergent and distracting questions, not least of all the monster question ‘what is art?’ Almost certainly minimalist poetry has overlaps with other types of poetry, as well as practitioners working in different disciplines, but to include that discussion here would be to deviate from the primary focus of my research. However, the approaches I have just described represent gaps in knowledge, and I anticipate these questions will be addressed in subsequent studies.

Lastly, it was important and inevitable that during my research I would write other works of poetry. Aside from some of these poems being different projects to *stack* I have often written using significantly different methodologies to those used in featured in the PhD, for example I have written using forms such as drone serialism and ‘one-word’ publications.

Although I believe that many of these projects are of interest, their inclusion would prove detrimental to my research aims and would make for an unfocussed document of my primary research activity. What follows in these pages is an understanding of a particular minimalist poetic practice in relationship to my creative portfolio, *stack*.

CHAPTER 1: MINIMALIST POETICS (MORE OR LESS)

The reader will note that from time to time contradictions appear...this is an inevitable aspect of any attempt to demarcate a style while it is still at a formative stage.

Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art* (36)¹

Since its historical inception — *circa* 1960 — a large body of minimalist poetry has been written by many poets. However, the term ‘minimalist poetry’ is only used intermittently and there has been little critical writing about the style. Perhaps the most famous minimalist poet, Aram Saroyan, in his memoir *Friends in the World* (2012), describes himself in the 1960s as being “a dedicated minimalist” (44). In addition, his collected minimalist poems — poems from the 1960s and 70s — is entitled *Complete Minimal Poems* (2007). Critics often use the term but without bringing it into focus. For example, in his introduction to the collected works of P. Inman Craig Dworkin notes that Robert Grenier is part of a “minimalist tradition” (*Written* xiii). Ron Silliman also notes that Grenier’s poetry falls under the minimalist sign. He states that in Grenier’s collection *Sentences* (1978) “the *removal* of context” accounts for “the

¹ Battcock’s *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1995), published in 1968, was one of the first attempts at trying to ground minimal art. Since then a good deal has been written on the subject, and an understanding of its history is no longer at a formative stage. The same cannot be said of minimalist poetry, even though it emerged around the same time.

minimalism of these pieces” (*The New Sentence* 168). Tom Orange, in his afterword to Clark Coolidge’s *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away* (2013), notes that Coolidge’s *Space* (1970) is a series of “radical minimalist experiments” (579). Richard Kostelanetz, in his essay “On Robert Lax” (1999), regards Lax “as among America’s greatest experimental poets, a true minimalist who can weave awesome poems from remarkably few words” (183), whilst Sigrid Hauff, in *A Line and Three Circles* (2007), believes that Lax writes “minimal poems, bared to the essentials” (94) and so on.

The limited recognition of minimalist poetry has three primary explanations: its limited popularity, the absence of any manifesto/school and the difficulty of defining the style. Its limited popularity derives not from readers disliking the style but rather from its anonymity — major minimalist poets Saroyan, Grenier and Lax are hardly household names. Whilst it is difficult to gauge the popularity of major figures in minimal art and music the names of the sculptors Carl Andre and Donald Judd, and composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass — within their field at the very least — are names with which people are immediately familiar. In part this is because art and music are more culturally visible. However, minimalist poetry is *principally* unknown as it has not been historicised. In comparison there is an abundance of historical and critical writing on minimal art and music.² However, the situation is beginning to change somewhat with the publication of some key pieces of contemporary critical research. Foremost amongst these are critical texts by Marc Botha, Karen Alexander and Curtis Faville. Botha’s transhistorical study of minimalism, entitled *A Theory of Minimalism* (2017), based on

² Books such as James Meyer *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (2001) and Kenneth Baker *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance* (1991), as well as K. Robert Schwartz *Minimalists (20th Century Composers)* and Wim Mertens’ *American Minimalist Music* (1998) represent just a small number of critical works around the style in art and music.

his PhD thesis “The Persistence of Minimalism” (2011), explores a wide variety of minimalist practices including minimalist poetry. Alexander’s PhD thesis “Minimalism in Twentieth Century American Writing” (2005) includes chapters that target Robert Creeley, Grenier, Saroyan and Lax. Curtis Faville’s series of blogposts (2009-2012), “Minimalism”, offers a survey of key poets. A few other short essays exist on the style such as Karl Young’s very brief history “Minimalism and its Expansions”, as well as Bob Grumann’s “MNMLST POETRY: Unacclaimed but Flourishing”, which examines minimalist poetry from a visual point of view. In addition to these is Jan Baetens’ engaging essay “Enough of this so-called Minimalism” (2005) that posits that minimalist poetry relies on philosophy for validation; with this dependence resulting in its failure. My creative portfolio and critical essay are an addition to this research and represent I believe the first critical explorations into minimalist poetry from a practitioner’s perspective. As practice-led research, *stack* differs from the works previously mentioned since it represents a rounded picture of minimalist poetic practice by consisting of a creative portfolio, framed and illuminated by a critical essay.

In addition to the absence of a minimalist manifesto poets have shied away from using the term ‘minimalist poetry’, ensuring its concealment. Exceptions are the clear acceptance of the term by Saroyan in the titling of his recent collected poems as “minimal”. Also, Young, Grumann and Faville, as poets who often write in similar ways to that which they critique, presumably consider much of their own poetry to be minimalist. Young explicitly states: “I came of age in the 60s, and like many others pursued minimalist procedures”. However, in general the term simply isn’t used or is avoided. For example, when Lax was asked in an interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg, if his work was concrete he said: “I don’t call my work concrete poetry. Somebody described some of my work as ‘abstract’. I feel at ease with that” (*Interview* 30). Likewise, minimalist artists and musicians have also been sceptical of the

classification ‘minimalist’. In “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1998), published in 1967, the artist Sol LeWitt (often claimed by art historians as a minimalist) wrote: “recently there has been much written about minimal art, but I have not discovered anyone who admits to doing this kind of thing” (835). In a similar way, composer Steve Reich — who forms one quarter of the subject matter of Keith Potter’s *Four Musical Minimalists* (2008) — in reply to fellow musician Michael Nyman’s observation “You’re not genuinely interested in minimal music?” said bluntly “No, I’m not” (*Writings* 95). Contemporary historians of music and art have considered why practitioners resist using the term. Paul Hillier for example points out that Reich and others refused the term on the grounds of “the dismissiveness with which it was so often applied” (*Writings* 4), whilst David Batchelor, amongst other art historians, notes that a number of artists refused to use the term on the basis that it was “a frustratingly misleading term” given to any “generally abstract-looking work” (*Minimalism* 6). Regardless of any resistance by practitioners to the minimalist tag movements have been firmly established by art and music historians. In art the first instance of the term is commonly attributed to Richard Wollheim in his essay “Minimal Art”, first published in 1965, and in music to Michael Nyman in his study *Experimental Music* (1999), published in 1974.

Baetens affirms that minimalist poetry is not well known. He believes that the style is inherently flawed as “it [minimalist poetry] never succeeds at defining its ‘basic parameters’ as easily as the plastic arts” (*Enough* 70), and therefore has no obvious presence.³ This point of view seems reasonable considering how rarely critical writing has engaged with minimalist poetry. Yet, more contentiously, he also considers that minimalist poetry “is the servant of philosophy” (*Enough* 68) and believes that minimalist poetry cannot be comprehended experientially. However, this point of view seems suspect. It’s true that many philosophies may

³ Baetens uses the term ‘poetic minimalism’ for minimalist poetry.

be attributed to minimalist poetry — perhaps more than any other type of poetry, due to its open-ended nature. Yet, whichever philosophies one might attribute to the poetry these remain adjunctive.⁴ Moreover, in general, minimalist poems do not rely on external contextual knowledge in order to be understood. This contrasts with a text that requires that the reader conduct some independent research in order to respond properly; Eliot's *The Wasteland* for instance. Poems which are less demanding than *The Wasteland* are also often propped up through contextualization which is often found in the blurb. In the blurb of the print version of *stack* (2017) readers are told that the poem is “a document of ‘minimalist interventions’”. This *is* contextual information of course — in terms of the way *stack* was made — although this contextual information is not essential in order to approach the text. True enough, many readers tend to have little or no grounding in the way in which minimalist poetry should be approached; however this is an educational problem, not a deficiency of the style.

Whilst it is constrictive to both the production and reception of minimalist poetry — or indeed any other style — to make it conform rigidly to a set of rules, historicising and defining the style proves incredibly useful. In populist terms such research helps to bring the style and its practitioners public attention. In addition, situating poets within a stylistic framework (if only speculatively/temporarily) allows us new perspectives on their work.

Such research also has its pitfalls and will have its detractors. Historicising minimalist poetry potentially makes it prone to strait-jacketing, and risks establishing a canon of poets at

⁴ A number of major philosophies could be attributed to minimalist poetry — Romanticism, Phenomenology, Buddhism, Marxism, Capitalism, and so on. This large range of philosophies is also just as variously attributed to minimalism in ‘the plastic arts’ as they are to minimalist poetry. I regard the freedom to choose how to approach minimalist poetry (and other minimalisms) as its *forte*.

the expense of others.⁵ Marjorie Perloff's entry, "Minimalism", in the *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993), may have been the only published critical discourse on the subject at the time.⁶ The entry opens with a definition: minimalism is "the principle of intentional reduction, whether formal or semantic, with respect to the size, scale, or range of a given poetic composition" (788). When Perloff uses the phrase "reduction" perhaps she is thinking of a poem like Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough. (*Selected* 113)

In his essay "Vorticism" (1914) Pound explains how the poem came to fruition: "I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call a work 'of secondary intensity.' Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following hokku-like sentence." According to Alexander, "[Charles] Reznikoff even manages to cut down Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', where there is 'a phrase that is completely unnecessary'", to:

In a Station of the Metro

Faces in a crowd;

⁵ For example, minimalist art is usually presented as being exclusively grounded in North America and practised by men. In the 2016 conference *Minimalism; Location Aspect Moment*, held at The University of Southampton, papers were presented which suggested that a full understanding of minimalist art, as a whole, is concealed by canonisation. For abstracts see www.minimalism2016blog.wordpress.com/

⁶ There was no entry in the first edition published in 1965 which was then reprinted in 1974. The entry in the current 2012 edition has not been amended in any significant way. The most interesting change, with regards to canonisation, is the removal of Bruce Andrews and the inclusion of Robert Lax.

Petals on a wet, black bough. (*Minimalism* 58-59)

In *stack* I have taken this reduction one stage further in my one-word line “faces” (68). My version of “In a Station of the Metro” trims the poem of *any* metaphorical content. Moreover, without the support of this essay the line is highly open-ended contextually which, as I shall go on to explore, is a key characteristic of the sort of minimalist poetry with which I am concerned.

Reduction however isn’t the whole picture.⁷ Later in her entry, Perloff develops ideas of what poetic minimalism might be:

m.[inimalism] is not a term used to refer to any short poem: it is not for instance, applied to the haiku or epigram. m.[inimalism] is a late 20th-c designation for a poetics that holds that sparseness, tautness, understatement, and reduction are emblematic of poetic authenticity. (788)⁸

The qualities in minimalist poetry of “sparseness, tautness, understatement and reduction” which are “emblematic of poetic authenticity” are created by avoiding the use of qualitative language — particularly metaphors and adjectives — to present the world or language ‘as it is’. Coolidge describes one instance of Saroyan’s writing process in an anecdote in his talk “Arrangement” (1977), which suggests that Saroyan saw sparseness as a process and an outcome:

I’m reminded of a story. I was once in Cambridge with Aram Saroyan who some of you may know of, who at that time was writing one-word poems. He would sit

⁷ Judd was sceptical of the use of the word ‘reduction’ to describe minimalist art practice. In “Specific Objects” (1965) he writes: “Simple form and one or two colors are considered less by old standards. If changes in art are compared backwards, there always seems to be a reduction”

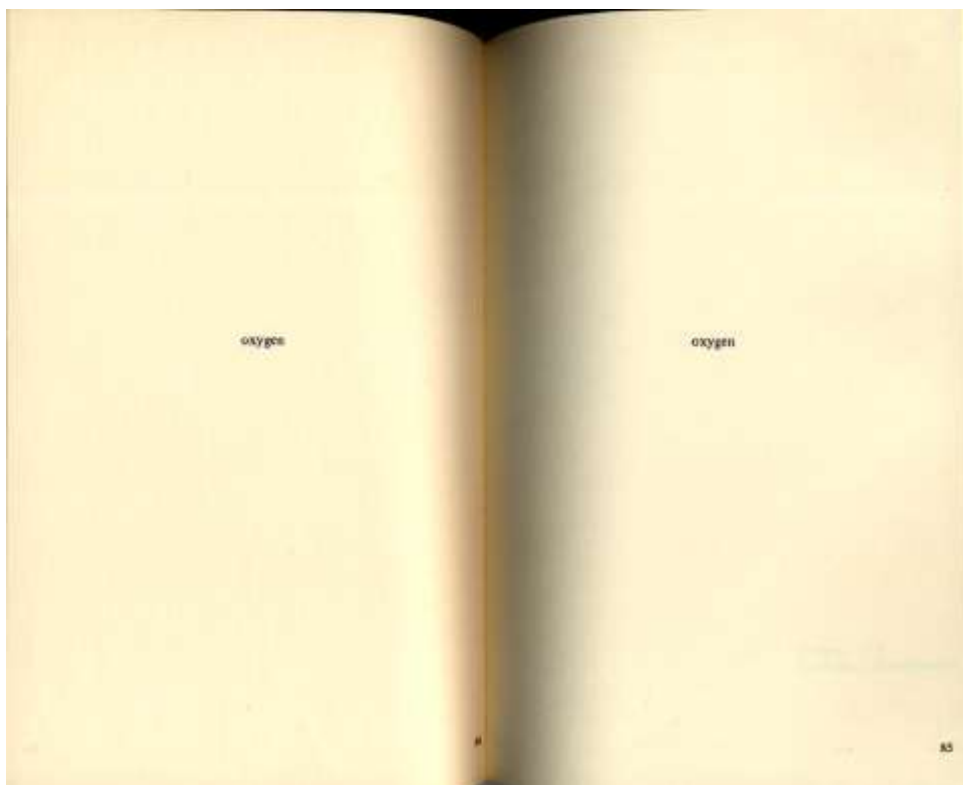
⁸ Reading between the lines I take it that haiku and epigram lack “poetic authenticity” because they employ metaphor and symbolism.

and smoke some dope and type one-word and sit and look at it for hours and take it out and type it again. Originally, they were words like ‘oxygen’ and then one day the word ‘leukemia’ appeared...

Saroyan’s poem (poems?) “oxygen” (48, 84. 85) occurs three times in his collection *The Rest* (1971):

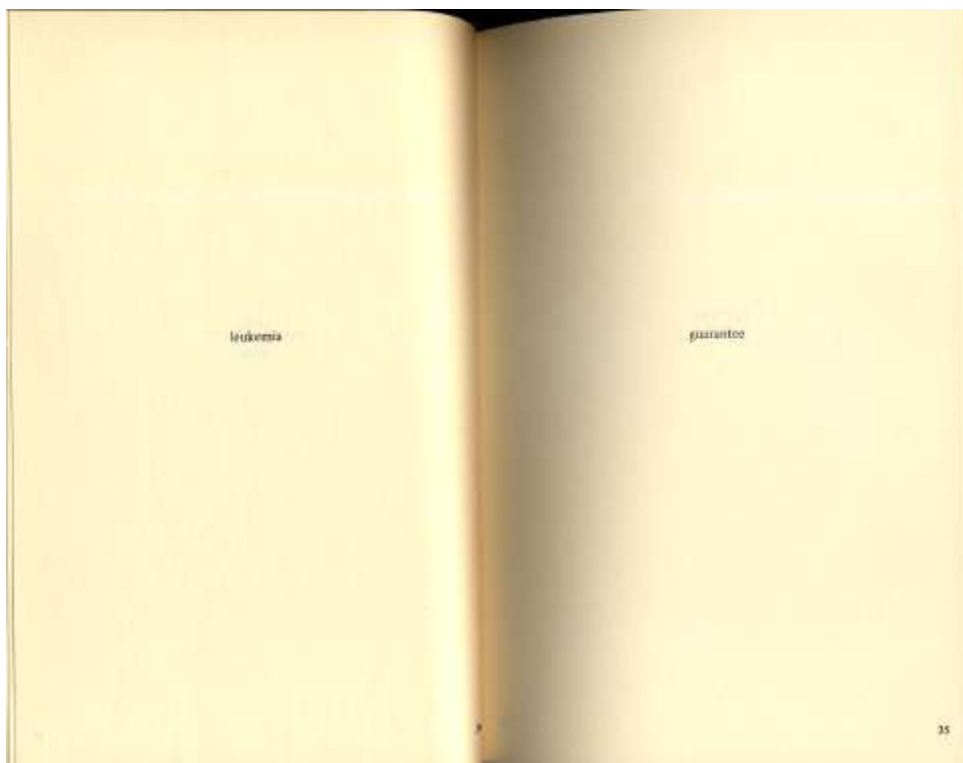


(Fig. 1. pages 48-49 from *The Rest*)



(Fig. 2 pages 84-85 from *The Rest*)

“leukemia” (34) appears once:



(Fig. 3 pages 34-35 from *The Rest*)

From Coolidge's account, in the case of "oxygen" and "leukemia", it is implied that Saroyan worked from a blank page all the way up to...one word. Other minimalist poets explain their practice along similar lines. In his diary Lax describes his writing process as "looking & naming, looking & naming: not doing very much more" (qtd. in Hauff, 125). In *On Natural Language* (2011) — a series of audio conversations with the poet Stephen Ratcliffe, whose current creative practice is also minimalist — Grenier explains his 'upward' writing process: "there's that old poem in *Sentences*, just two words 'JOE JOE' and it's like me calling the dog up in New Hampshire."

In *stack* most lines use the approach of working upwards 'from scratch' rather than being reductions. In several cases I have written as little as one word per line — "cups" (35), for example, is a line written onto a 'blank page'.⁹ As a word I liked its sonic qualities and its ability to act as verb and noun simultaneously. "cups" is my initial and complete response to a set of cups — it is not pared down from some longer poem.

In the English context, Blake Morrison's curious essay "In Defence of Minimalism" (1976) defines minimalist poetry as a short form in which the reader is not expected to engage in the language of the poem to any great degree. In the essay he writes that:

The real sixties contribution to post-war minimalist tradition, however, came not from the Group, nor from Liverpool and Newcastle, nor even from the neo-Poundians. It came from a number of poets - Ian Hamilton, David Harsent, Hugo Williams, Michael Fried, Colin Falck, and to a lesser extent Douglas Dunn and Peter Dale. (48)

⁹ As stated in the introduction I treat the lines in *stack* to be discrete — examples of single poems — as well as being parts of larger units.

The inclusion of Michael Fried in this list seems ironic as Fried famously lamented minimalist art in his 1967 diatribe “Art and Objecthood” (1998). For Morrison, the minimalism of these poets is characterised by the “taciturnity” (43) of their work which is akin to the minimalism of Samuel Beckett. However, unlike the work of Beckett, these poets do not pay much regard to language. Admittedly, in terms of classification and canonisation, minimalism as a whole was somewhat in its infancy when Morrison wrote his essay. Yet, to ignore a whole raft of poets, who would have been known to Morrison, such as Bob Cobbing, Ian Hamilton-Finlay and Jackson Mac Low, who fall much more in line with minimalism’s general aesthetics, seems careless at best.

For Morrison, the poets whose work he explores is characterised by “brevity”. Also, they do not use “misplaced Bardic audacity” (44). Furthermore:

With the myth-kitty ransacked, the social commentary-box finally handed over to the media, and heroism, since Auschwitz, out of place, the most representative and important post-war poets have been forced into an articulation of small, personal experiences, the significance of which may or may not (it depends on how minimalist the poets are) be made apparent. (43)

Morrison seems to understand the primary function of poetry, no matter the era, as the transaction of information. In his idea of minimalism he proposes that the information-giving of “small personal experiences” calls for a short form — unfortunately this implies that the subject matter his minimalists write about is not worthy of much interest.

One poem that Morrison cites as minimalist is Ian Hamilton’s “Curfew”:

It’s midnight

And our silent house is listening

To the last sounds of people going home.

We lie beside our curtained window

Wondering

What makes them do it. (49)

After decoding the weak metaphor “And our silent house is listening”, in which the house stands for two or more people, we understand that the inhabitants are listening to their guests going home and ‘wonder’ about their behaviour (which is unspecified). We also attempt to decode the metaphorical title “Curfew” and generate connotational signification. A kind of contextual situation is set up, based on these frames of reference — the end of a party.

Veronica Forrest-Thompson’s point of view, with regard to poems which are written in a similar way to “Curfew”, is useful to consider. She believes that many contemporary poems ask us to:

Simply insert the poem in a known world of discourse, to take it as a reflection on problems whose parameters are familiar, and to grant it, because of the interpretative work it has imposed, the status of a profound reflection of some kind. (*Poetic Artifice* 99)

In “Curfew” we are not encouraged to explore the language used in the poem. Moreover, the context does not seem particularly important, rather the main purpose of “Curfew” is to acknowledge the “profound reflection” of the poet, his sensitivity and genius (although what exactly that sensitivity and genius might be is far from clear). Morrison almost says as much of “Curfew”:

This is the kind of poem that, to borrow a phrase of Larkin’s, ‘leaves nothing to be said’, and will probably leave cold those readers whose approach to poetry is exclusively cerebral, and who derive their pay or pleasure from interpreting more complex works of art. (49)

Such an essay proves highly useful in exemplifying how wide an application the term ‘minimalist poetry’ has. Yet, the poetry that I call minimalist requires a greater degree of engagement with language than a poem such as “Curfew” does. What I refer to as minimalist poetry is comprised of concrete nouns and everyday words, simple sentences (and also sentences which are fragments or have mildly disruptive syntax), that does not employ metaphor, and that has no clear context yet nevertheless allows for context to be easily constructed. Poems such as “Curfew” are best termed ‘short poems’, but these sorts of poems are not the subject matter of this thesis. The minimalist poetry with which I am concerned results in a heightened attention on words as well as images. The result of using the techniques that I have described heightens attention on material signifiers *as well as* what is signified. For ‘heightened attention’ I will at times make use of the words ‘slowness’ and ‘dwelling’; terms other poets and critics use to describe a similar phenomenon. For instance, according to Hauff, in much of Lax’s poetry, the placement of “extremely short lines word for word, syllable by syllable, one vertically under the other...compels the reader to slowness” (123). For Ratcliffe, “slowness might be accomplished, for one thing, by increasing the space between words in a given line” (60). This is to say, that in minimalist poetry, whatever the individual methods used, the reader is encouraged to take their time and to dwell.

Some minimalist poets have attempted to make the signifier the sole focus of the poem, where the signifier’s function is to be self-reflexive or to be read in relationship to other signifiers, on a purely material level. An example of this endeavor can be found in Coolidge’s collection *Space*. Take for instance the four poems “A”, “tions”, “is so” and “the”:



(Fig. 4 pages 82-83 from *Space*)

According to the dust jacket of *Space*, “Coolidge's experiments invite us to regard words as objects, as organisms with patterns of existing which are specific to themselves, inexplicable and marvelous.” The reader, perhaps the writer, is encouraged to accept words as material facts. “is so” for example does not easily refer to anything outside of itself. The reader might perhaps concentrate on typographical, graphemic and sonic qualities of the poem, or do nothing with it at all so that the poem says ‘nothing’.

Language poet Steve McCaffery’s essay “The Death of the Subject” (1977) examines some of his poems as well as those by others which, as George Hartley notes in *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (1989), could feasibly be called minimalist. The poems cited in McCaffery’s essay accentuate signifiers. One example is McCaffery’s untitled poem, “wlkt sTdh”:

wlkt sTdh

(FPRTO

T

E

(fF)

Tts

xcphj t t

cb (n.p.)

McCaffery states that:

By eliminating grammatical armament from language, by a freeing of the parts to be themselves and by inviting the reader into this immanence of the text, the full polysemous possibilities of language are opened up. (n.p.)

For McCaffery, much poetry — as well as other language-based media with its “armament” — deliberately conceals language, maintaining poetry’s position in capitalist society as a receptacle for the transaction of information from the poet to the reader. McCaffery proposes an alternative in which language is used non-conventionally, stripped of its “armament” — its support — resulting in texts that require the participation of readers to such an extent that they become aware of the “immanence of the text” — its existence as language, as a poem — and become makers of meaning. It might be, for example, that “wlkt” means ‘walked’ and “cb” stands for fellow Language poet ‘Charles Bernstein’, as well as countless other readings. Signification is elusive. For McCaffery, such writing focuses on “the signifier rather than the referent” (n.p.) — by “referent” he means ‘signified’. However, even though the initial focus of “wlkt sTdh” may be on the signifier that doesn’t have to remain the case. A reader may

‘decode’ any poem should she or he wish and give preference to the signified over the signifier. Even the ultimate attempt to avoid reference — the blank page poem — can ‘point outwards’. As Michael Gibbs notes in his introductory essay to *All or Nothing: An Anthology of Blank Page Books* (2005): “the very blankness of the page provides a metaphorical paradigm of the possibilities of saying everything and/or nothing” (8).

Whilst I am in admiration of poems that attempt to be non-referential on an exclusive basis one aim in *stack* was to give prominence to signifier and signified in tandem. At the level of the line the signifier is perhaps most highlighted in disjunctive syntax such as “i drew a line at a beaches” (45) and occasional compounds like “turkeyfatsnow” (28). In “i drew a line at a beaches” the failure for the article and the noun to agree was written in an attempt to resist signification being easily made. However, there is enough in the line for the language to signify many things. One obvious reading is that someone is drawing, at the seaside, in the sand. Less obviously the line could signify a speaker refusing to do something, as in ‘I draw the line at going to the beach’. On the other hand, in some lines (again just considering the poem at the level of the line), the signified rather than the signifier seems more pronounced such as the essentially complete sentence “walked into a bar” (6). The line “walked into a bar” points more directly to the signified (somebody walking into a pub for instance) than “i drew a line at a beaches” does. However, the lack of overall context in *stack* means that “bar” might be just as ambiguous as “drew”, and stand for something else, like a metal rod. The signifier and the signified in *stack* — as in much other poetry I consider to be minimalist — are in regular dialogue but also in flux. Depending on the conscious and unconscious decisions one makes either signifier or signified may come to dominate attention at any point.

The roots of the type of minimalist poetry which places heightened attention on both signifier and signified in tandem can be found in the two important, early twentieth century,

proto-minimalist practices imagism and objectivism. In his essay “Imagisme” (1913) F.S. Flint recalls the imagist manifesto as penned by H.D., Pound and Richard Adlington. Of chief interest to my research are the maxims from the manifesto that poetry should be written using “direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective” and that poets should “use absolutely no word that [does] not contribute to the presentation” (199). In the same issue of *Poetry*, in his list-essay “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (1913), Pound demands that we should refrain from using “an expression [such as] as ‘dim lands of peace.’ It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol” (201). William Carlos Williams makes a similar point in his 1921 poem “Spring and All” — a long poem written in a mix of verse and essayistic prose — “to repeat and repeat the thing without naming it is only to dull the sense and results in frustration” (*Collected Poems Volume 1* 202). In other words, Pound and Williams suggest that poetry should be devoid of figurative language. Not all imagist poems were able to achieve this aim however. As Alexander points out: “as with any movement, Imagist poetry did not always live up to the standards set by its manifestos” (*Minimalism* 19). Nevertheless, a number of highly successful poems were written under imagism’s banner. Pound’s poem “In a Station of the Metro” (1913) — discussed previously — is emblematic of the movement’s aims. The first line of the poem, if treated as bearing no obvious relationship to the second line — “The apparition of these faces in the crowd;” — is representative of subjective treatment, by virtue of the word “apparition”. Whereas the second line “Petals on a wet, black bough” can be taken as an objective treatment, as the line might describe something described literally and not metaphorically. However, the poem can be read differently. As noted earlier Reznikoff edits the word “apparition” out of Pound’s poem, suggesting that he believed that the “direct treatment” of subjective content is paradoxical. Furthermore, the semi-colon at the end the first

line perhaps suggests that the second line is a metaphor that ‘explains’ what has come before. Regardless of these potential flaws in the poem — in regards to the imagist agenda — ambiguity and complexity is manifested by a considered choice of language on Pound’s part resulting in a poem which, importantly, is read at the level of both the signifier and signified.

The objectivists shared similar ideas to the imagists and their work is a development. In his essay “Sincerity and Objectification” (1931) Louis Zukofsky describes objectivist poetry in similar terms to imagism: it must be sincere and not dramatised, poets must think “with the things as they exist” (273). Charles Altieri, although writing sometime later than Zukofsky, offers the most lucid account of the practice in his essay “The Objectivist Tradition” (1979). He claims: whereas imagism “threatens reducing poetic craft to the merely descriptive function of making perceptual images” (12) the objectivists were able to free “imagist techniques into methods based on notions of field, measure, and ‘open form’ in the service of principles of sincerity and objectification” (14). For Altieri, ‘freeing’ is achieved through compositional strategy, in particular collage, which “enables images to become a form of thinking” (13). Altieri believes that by employing collage poems can have “complex dimensions of interrelatedness” (13), and are thus resistant to limited interpretations. The minimalist poets who have influenced my practice use different structural methods to the objectivists. However, both share a distrust of a poetics which strives for “dialectical synthesis” (13).

Williams’ poem “Lines” published in 1921 is one of his most successful poems and embodies the aims of imagism and the objectivists:

Lines

Leaves are grey green,
the glass broken, bright green. (*Collected* 159)

The poem attempts to be sincere, as opposed to being metaphorical/symbolic. It is not entirely clear what Williams names in the poem — ambiguity is set up deliberately and is part of the poem's sincerity. Responsibility is handed to the reader who, rather than play detective and reveal a set, coded, meaning, must assign meaning for themselves, creating what McCaffery later called — via Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) — “the alternative sense of reader and writer as equal and simultaneous participants within a language product” (*Death* n.p.).

“Lines” hinges on the way a reader treats the line break. The line break effects how colour might be perceived depending on our perception of the two objects — “leaves” and “glass” — where glass could be either a drinking receptacle or the material ‘glass’ in a general sense.¹⁰

The poem can be parsed in the following ways:

- The leaves are ‘grey green’ in colour. The glass is ‘bright green’.
- The leaves at first are seen as ‘grey’ but upon consideration by the speaker (or after a change in light) are ‘green’. The glass is ‘bright green’.
- The leaves at first are seen as ‘grey’ but upon consideration by the speaker (or after a change in light) are ‘green’. Now, after further consideration the leaves are ‘bright green’. The colour of the glass is unidentified.
- There are different leaves — some are ‘grey’, some are ‘green’ and some are ‘bright green’. The colour of the glass is unidentified.

¹⁰ Although poets may consider their poems to be ‘objective’, no poem can resist metaphorical or symbolic reading. For example, amongst endless interpretations, one could take ‘broken glass’ to mean ‘mirror’ and in this case to be symbolic of seven year’s bad luck.

- The leaves are ‘grey green’, (the) glass is broken. Together these two objects produce a ‘bright green’. The colour of the glass is unidentified.

Williams’ syntactical ambiguity — in a similar way to collage — creates “complex dimensions of interrelatedness” (Altieri 13). This outcome, added to the brevity of the poem, makes “Lines” one of the first minimalist poems.

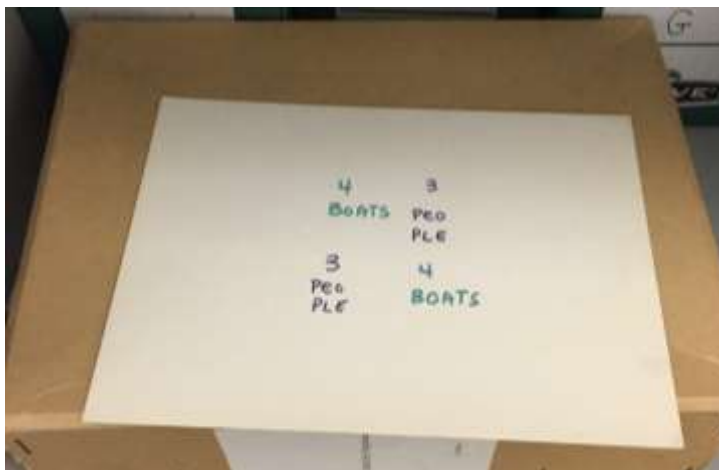
Around the 1960s a huge body of minimalist poetry was written on a consistent basis by many poets including Lax, Creeley, Saroyan, Coolidge and Grenier, as well as the sculptor Carl Andre. When minimalist poetry began is a matter of conjecture and an impossible line of enquiry for this thesis. Studies which undertake such research are easily brought into question in any case. In Edward Strickland’s survey of art and music *Minimalism: Origins* (2000) — one of the few surveys to mention poetry — Strickland claims that artistic and musical minimalism originated before other minimalisms: “Literary Minimalism is a later developer altogether, very much a child of the late sixties and seventies. The early works of Sam Shepard were influenced by the Minimalist aesthetic, as was the Minimal poetry” (12). However, to conclude in such a way stems in part from ignorance towards poetry and in part through a belief that art and music are always ‘ahead’ of poetry (and other marginalised arts). Art and music receive far more public attention than poetry does primarily due to their economic value. I would contend that around the 1960s there was a moment of ‘equifinality’ — that similar points of view were reached in roughly the same period by artists who came from a range of trajectories. Genealogies of course can be traced back endlessly, which is one of the huge tasks that Botha has taken up. He makes a helpful distinction between the canonical minimalism of the 1960s and minimalism to describe art from other eras. Moreover, he suggests that the tag ‘minimalism’, or indeed any label applied to artists and artefacts, “exceeds the possibility of its accurate application” (*Persistence* 24).

The minimalist poetry of Lax, Creeley, Saroyan, Coolidge, Grenier and Andre is usually very short, uses common, everyday language, and is highly contextually open-ended yet also contextually rich.

The shortest type of minimalist poem, the one-word poem, is not uncommon. The whole of issue number 25 of minimalist poet and artist Ian Hamilton-Finlay's magazine *Poor Old Tired Horse* (1967) is devoted to the form.¹¹ Grenier's poem "GREENS" from his book *Series: Poems 1967-71* (1978), which I take to be presented without a title, is one of many examples to be found in single author collections:

GREENS

Other minimalist poems contain barely more than one word. For instance, take Lax's poem "4 Boats 3 People" (n.d.) — a poem published on a postcard:



¹¹ In *The Oulipo Compendium* (2005), edited by Harry Mathews and Alistair Brochie, it is reported that in 1961 François Le Lionnais wrote "A poem consisting of a single letter: T" (178). In the collection of poetic sketches *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms* (1996) — edited by David Lehman — minimalist poet Dave Morice reports that under his pseudonym Joyce Holland he "solicited lowercase oneletter (sic) poems from one hundred four poets and published their submissions in her *Alphabet Anthology*" (155).

It tends to be the case that the fewer words used in a minimalist poem the more open-ended the context. To put this another way we could use the variously attributed motto of minimalism ‘less is more’. In “GREENS” and “4 boats 3 People” it might be the case that the word “GREENS”, from Grenier’s poem, has a greater level of lexical ambiguity than either of the words “boats” or “people” from Lax’s poem. “GREENS” could describe a set of colours, be a colloquial term for vegetables or, in the context of the poem, function as a newly coined verb, and so on. However, this is not the prime reason that “GREENS” is more open-ended than “4 boats 3 People”. Rather, “GREENS” is more open-ended as the word ‘greens’ has no other signifiers with which to associate. If there were more than one signifier in the poem then the context might be narrowed to an extent. For example, if we were to add a title such as ‘Peas’ we might now think the poem is concerned with vegetables, or if we added one word, such as ‘REDS’, we might now think that the poem was about colour. On the other hand, one-word poems don’t have to ‘feel’ as ambiguous as “GREENS”. For instance, in Saroyan’s one-word poem “Shakespeare!” (n.p.), from his collection *Electric Poems* (1972) — centred and in the middle of the page — it would be hard to propose that the poem referred to any Shakespeare other than William Shakespeare. Yet what aspect of Shakespeare the poem refers to is far from clear. It could be anything about his life and his works. Saroyan’s poem also displays another common attribute of many minimalist poems — the explicit or tacit indication of enthusiasm. In “Shakespeare!” this is suggested explicitly by the exclamation mark, perhaps suggesting an admiration of the great bard’s work. Other examples include Grenier’s remark in *Conversation with Stephen Ratcliffe at Kelly Writer’s House* that: “green green green - one of those greens is green and when that happens it’s a (sic) eureka moment”. Elsewhere, in “Arrangement”, Coolidge says of *Space* that “the words really came to me very strongly”.

However, the addition of words does not have to narrow a poem's context. Nor is the narrowing of context always the approach minimalist poets have taken. For example, in Grenier's poem "PAINTINGS", from *Series*, there are no obvious connections to be made between the signifiers:

PAINTINGS

lamb stew (n.p.)

Alternatively, in a poem printed on the same page, "STEAM", the relationship of the signifiers seems to reduce contextual possibilities a little. For example, the poem could suggest a sentence such as 'there is steam inside':

STEAM

inside (n.p.)

Andre's "First Five Poems" collected in *Carl Andre: Poems* (2014) but originally published in *Seven Books* (1969)¹², takes two forms depending on how we treat them/it. On the one hand, it is a set of one-word poems and, at the same time, a single poem. Art historian Liz Kotz describes "First Five Poems" as "a series of five single lowercase words—'green / eye / sound / five / horn'—centred on each of five pages, interspersed among other poems in Andre's book *A Theory of Poetry: 1960-65*" (*Words* 141).¹³ According to Andre what might be called polysemy, or the opening up of contextual possibilities, is made manifest by getting "rid of the overriding super-referent" (qtd. in Kotz 142). By "super-referent" Andre means writing which

¹² I've not seen the original but according to The Tate Gallery *Seven Books* comprises seven collections: *Three Operas*, *A Theory of Poetry*, *America Drill*, *Passport*, *One Hundred Sonnets*, *Lyrics and Odes*, *Shape and Structure*. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/18009> for more.

¹³ Interestingly in the reprinted "First Five Poems", in the recent selection *Carl Andre: Poems* (2014), the five words (five poems?) are placed in sequence, one page at a time.

does not use conventional syntax and where words therefore cannot be easily placed in relationship to each other, allowing the signifiers a greater chance to be viewed as material facts. As McCaffery would put it, such writing “presents a semiotic ambivalence to the reading experience: do you decipher or do you augment and complete?” (*North* n.p.). Note how McCaffery’s position in 1977, in which he urges us to eliminate “grammatical armament” (n.p.), is similar to Andre’s, writing in 1962.

After Andre’s friend, the artist Hollis Frampton, “proposes an alternate set [of poems]—‘blue / six / hair / ear / light’” (Kotz 142), Andre replies that:

both sets are radically different from the poem: ‘I am a red pansy.’ These latter five words relate most strongly to each other and depart very far from the specificity of their referents. In fact we may presume that the five words together share one super-referent. The five words of my *First Five Poems* very purposely do not share a referent. My green is a square of that color or a village’s common land. (qtd. in Kotz 142)

Of course, although in “First Five Poems” there is no super-referent, connections can be made between the words at a variety of levels — an “eye” can be “green”, a “horn” can “sound”, “five” and “horn” are both four-letter words, and so on. Also, through the addition of syntactical elements, a sentence can be made by using the words in the order in which Andre presents them, for instance: ‘Her green eye makes the sound of five muted horns’. Yet these sorts of readings are made exclusively by the reader.

The ‘single’ sentence/line poem is another common mode in minimalist poetry. Examples include syntactically sound sentences such as “the watering of the yard water” (n.p.) from Grenier’s *Sentences*, syntactically ambiguous sentences such as Saroyan’s “whistling in the street a car turning in the room ticking” (n.p.) from *Pages* (1969) and the syntactically

disjunctive, like Grenier's "that's little house too for the day" (*Sentences* n.p.). It may be that the more the super-referent is fractured the greater the range of contextual possibilities. Nevertheless, even in single sentence poems which *are* syntactically secure contextual ambiguity remains high.

Although usually situated in terms of Language poetry Ron Silliman might also be thought of as a minimalist poet. According to Andrew Epstein, Silliman came to minimalism after the 1960s and found himself "at something of a dead end" (*There is no Content* 748). After publishing a few volumes which Silliman did not consider to be completely successful he arrived at a solution to minimalism's progression in the form of his 1978 epic volume-length poem *Ketjak* collected in *The Age of Huts* (1997).¹⁴ Here is an extract:

Look at that white room, filled with fleshy babies. Peach pits. Point of transfer.
 When, as I hunkered down to turn over the small shells, shaking them free of sand,
 she asked me what it was I was doing, I said "Looking for the good ones." A tall
 glass of tawny port. A pleasure and discomfort in the knowledge of having become,
 by the fact of your absence, the focal point. Shadows between houses leave earth
 cool and damp. Retina burn. A slick gaggle of ambassadors. Astronauts hold hands,
 adrift in the sky. We ate them. The flag. (15)

Ketjak (which will be discussed in more detail in other parts of the critical essay) is written in prose blocks and composed of some 2048 sentences. Many of the sentences are 'complete', others abbreviated and some 'bare' noun-phrases. More often than not sentences in *Ketjak*

¹⁴ To my knowledge commentary on *Ketjak* does not place it within a minimalist canon. The poem is often discussed in relationship to Language poetry or Silliman's self-named practice The New Sentence. An explanation of The New Sentence or Language poetry, and their relationship to minimalist poetry, is beyond the scope of this thesis — there are many critical texts which explore these two practices and positions.

have a super-referent — that is to say that they are grammatically cohesive — such as “Look at that white room, filled with fleshy babies” or “we ate them” from the above passage. Yet *Ketjak*, at the level of the paragraph, through the paratactic positioning of sentences, creates what Silliman calls “torquing”, the “function of which is to enhance ambiguity and polysemy” (*The New Sentence* 90). In other words Silliman places grammatically conventional sentences one after the other which bear no immediate relation in contextual terms. Whereas Andre omits the super-referent at the level of the sentence one could say that it is absent in *Ketjak* at the level of the paragraph, which is to say that his paragraphs are not cohesive in any normal sense. Consequently, *Ketjak* is bulging with a vast range of contextual possibilities, one of minimalism’s key trademarks — there is no movement towards a fixed point.

Minimalist poetry continues to be practised today and is still evolving.¹⁵ Recently, as with all styles of poetry, contemporary poets have used digital technologies as a way of exploring form. In his web-based set of poems *Action Score Generator* (2013), Nathan Walker randomises text within a six-word parameter to generate minimal sentences. Walker explains the poem in the preface to the print version of the book:

The Action Score Generator is a website that runs a JavaScript code. The code produces a text of six words in length for six seconds. Every six seconds the six word text is replaced by another six word text and so on and so, the six word texts disappear. (*Action* 2015)

The web version produces poems such as:

ROSES BY

¹⁵ Another thesis deserves to be written linking the minimalist poets that I have discussed thus far — and throughout the rest of the thesis — with the multitude of ‘visual’ artists who use minimalist textual practices in their art such as Lawrence Weiner, Jenny Holzer, On Kawara and Ed Ruscha.

FINGERS WRITE

BESIDE LIPS¹⁶

Tony Lopez has also made use of digital technology in his New Sentence sequences “More and More” (2011), from his print collection *Only More So* (2011), and “Weymouth Sands” (2012), in order to create original structures. Lopez explains on his blog that “More and More”:

Is an animation that simulates a Solari departure board as used in airports and train stations. There are sixty-six sentences programmed into the flash animation. At each new transition from sentence to sentence, each cell of the board travels through the alphabet, numbers and punctuation marks, until it gets to the character (or blank) required for the next sentence.

“Weymouth Sands” is a similar project to “More and More” which Lopez describes as: “51 screens of material collected in Weymouth, plus credits, shown on a solar powered traffic management sign”.¹⁷

However, innovation in minimalist poetry is by no means located solely in new technologies, it still has much to play out on the page and in cross-genre approaches such as *stack*, as I shall go on to demonstrate.

¹⁶ This poem was generated 12th April 2017. The permutations in the web-based version of *Action Score Generator* are huge. None of the poems are recorded by the website and therefore the chances of “ROSES BY FINGERS WRITE BESIDE LIPS” coming around again are extremely unlikely.

¹⁷ Silliman and Grenier’s work has also appeared on different platforms over recent years. For example, Joe Newlin has designed a random twitterfeed presentation of Silliman’s *Tjanting*. Grenier’s *Sentences* has been made into an online random generator by its original publisher Whalecloth. In addition, the advent of highly sophisticated electronic search tools allows for new creative reading strategies and harvesting approaches of digital texts.

CHAPTER 2: MINIMALIST INTERVENTIONS

Most lines in *stack* originate from carrying out ‘minimalist interventions’. To a lesser extent, interventions were preceded by the writing of lines. By ‘intervention’ I mean an activity that is carried out with a high level of attentiveness, in order to familiarise or defamiliarise the environment and self. In addition, the interventions often involve doing very little and are often presented in the poem without context — hence they are ‘minimal’. There are a number of contemporary poets and artists who practice in a similar manner. Emma Cocker’s didactic prose-poem “Bide Your Time”, from her collection *The Yes of the No* (2016), is a good example and is similar in its poetics to *stack*. In the poem she states: “moments of stillness and slowness — of creative non-production or the event of doing nothing — break or rupture the smooth flow of habitual routine, momentarily illuminating openings and fissures within which to imagine things other than what they are” (21). In *stack*, by being highly attentive and by ‘rupturing’ the routine and the conventional I have tried to counter practices of accelerated living.

Many of the interventions are everyday occurrences, such as “crushed a snail” (8) — which describes that very act — and “lime” (7) — catching sight of a lime in a fruit bowl and looking at it. Alternatively, I have also conducted interventions which are subversions of the everyday — non-normative situations such as “listened to a buttercup” (22) and “standing next to a biscuit” (45).

Interventions share a minimalist stylistic: they are simple to carry out and require a minimal amount of materials or skill to perform. They vary from being planned — sometimes far in advance — to being carried out by chance encounter. In addition, they focus on specific activities yet have no set goals or meaning to them. Furthermore, in general, they have been

conducted in private, or when in public settings in secret, meaning that they have not become spectacles performed for an audience.

In Guy Debord's essay "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life" (1962), he suggests that in capitalist society the repetitive elements of life dominate the varied (the creative) to construct a society of people who are "deprived of the opportunity to personally make their own history." To counter creative deprivation "the creative aspects of life [must] always predominate over the repetitive". For this to take place one must take "conscious choice and gamble" and search for "new configuration[s] of everyday life". Our everyday lives may be considered as formed of two parts which are entwined — work and leisure. In the workplace we are regularly overtly subjected to the repetitive — the employee has agreed to carry out the employer's wishes over and over again. On the other hand, the repetitive nature of leisure is controlled by more covert means, by devices such as television, print media, motorised transport and advertising, resulting in, as Debord says in *Perspectives*, a "scarcity of free time and scarcity of possible uses of this free time" — new-media can be added to this list nowadays. Popular leisure activities, Debord would have it, are deliberately designed to encourage passivity and disembodiment in order that the capitalist system retains its power.

In his study of the quotidian, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel De Certeau shares similar points of view with Debord and feels that history is made *for* us rather than *by* us. Narratives are received as homogenised entities. At a local level people have the same everyday experiences and at a global level the same news stories are told in formulaic ways. In the chapter "Walking the City" De Certeau outlines a concept which he calls "legends" (106), used to describe narratives — fictitious or non-fictitious — that are characterised by being new and created organically, rather than being formulaic and repetitive. For De Certeau "legends"

are “the object of a witch-hunt” just “like the extermination of trees, forests, and hidden places in which such ‘legends’ live” (106). Nowadays we have a paucity of “legends” to draw upon. Such criticism of the present may romanticise the past yet it seems reasonable to say that with the continued rise of globalisation “legends” are becoming less commonplace. However, it is not the premise of this chapter to examine the causes of the repetitive world, deprived of its “legends”, but rather how to combat them.

Importantly, as my research has developed, I have come to consider many of the interventions that I have done as walks. Most of them involve walking, even if only a tiny distance. In addition, whether walking long or short distances, I have thought about the aspects that make up a single walk as a reduced set of activities, shorn of specific context and therefore minimalist. Artist and poet Yoko Ono’s Fluxus poem “Dance Piece X”, collected in *Acorn* (2013), suggests to: “think of all your movements in life as dance movements” (n.p.). Ono’s principal is just as well applied to any practice in which one is aware of the body in relationship to the world, walking being one of those too. Moreover, at all stages of our life we are always ‘moving’. There is no getting away from it. As Rebecca Solnit notes in her study of walking, *Wanderlust* (2001), “walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world” (29).

Ben Jacks’ essay “Reimagining Walking: Four Practices” (2004) is amongst the large and expanding body of research on walking.¹⁸ His essay concerns “the simple act of walking” which “has been rendered alien and almost obsolete in the contemporary landscape”. Jacks believes that “ordinary walking has become a rebellious and subversive act” (5). The

¹⁸ There are many excellent books on walking as practice including Henry Thoreau, *Walking* (1851), Iain Sinclair *London Orbital: A Walk around the M25* (2003), and David Evans (ed.) *The Art of Walking: A Field Guide* (2012).

subversive act of walking can be divided into “four aspects of walking practice...*sighting*, *measuring*, *reading*, and *merging*”. These four aspects can be treated separately or “woven into a singular practice of imaginatively walking the land.” *Sighting* involves the intuitive understanding of “the relationship among physical objects in the landscape.” In *measuring* “Persons note and witness the measure of the land and commit it to memory” (6). In *reading*, the landscape is navigated “using stories” — which is to say that the landscape is walked against the background of literature of some sort. Finally, *Merging* is the “heightened awareness of time and consciousness as a special quality, distinct from everyday life” (8). For Jacks, the four aspects when woven, as they often are, result in aesthesis:

The ancient Greek word for sensation or perception, *aesthesis*, means the breathing in of the world. In walking, we breathe and encounter persons and things *other* than the self. The bodily experience of walking and the pace of engagement with the world opens the space to recognize its beauty and distress. (8-9)

Jacks’ four aspects suggest a walking practice which familiarises and defamiliarises our experience of the world. At one end of the spectrum *sighting* and *measuring* suggest a high level of familiarising — walkers acknowledge what exists. At the other end, *reading* and *merging* suggest a high level of defamiliarisation — they suggest a more spiritual or abstract knowledge learned through walking. Jacks contends that the four aspects are conducted in order to undo “the alienating aspects of modernity and postmodernity” (6).

Co-incidentally the interventions that I have conducted can be neatly grouped as taking place in four environments — the countryside, the city, the house and the workplace. In each of these environments the interventions can be further classified as those in which the walker familiarises or defamiliarises the environment. For De Certeau, the walker familiarises “In that way he makes them [the environments] exist as well as emerge” and defamiliarises when he

“transforms each spatial signifier into something else. He thus makes a selection” (*Practice* 98). I will now go on to show how, in these four environments, by using a minimalist stylistic, I created “new configurations of everyday life” to use Debord’s term and imagined “things other than what they are” (21) to use Cocker’s.

2.1: COUNTRYSIDE

The interventions that I have conducted in the countryside have often involved walking long distances. Conducting long distance walks is not a new activity for me — it is one which I have done for many years before writing *stack*. However, until *stack* I had not considered walking to be creative practice. Nor had I written about walking using the discrete line form which *stack* uses unvaryingly.

In an intervention such as “went for a walk on a tuesday” (59) quite simply I planned to go for a walk in the Peak District on a Tuesday, then carried out this intervention and wrote down the line afterwards. This intervention has more to do with familiarising than it does with defamiliarising — *sighting* the event and *measuring* the day. I was able to interrupt the repetitive by this framing — to walk on a Tuesday, rather than on a Saturday or Sunday, highlighted the act as an uncommon experience as I normally work on a Tuesday.

“went for a walk on a tuesday” and other similar lines such as “i went out” (66) and “went walking” (63) also demonstrate Jacks’ aspect of *reading* and were prompted by some of the diary entries in *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth* (1971), in particular ‘The Alfoxden Journals’ written in 1798. Some of Wordsworth’s entries consist of a single, short, sentence

that unwittingly prefigures minimalist poetry.¹⁹ There are many entries that describe Wordsworth's walking practices in reasonably detailed fashion such as February 10th:

10th. Walked to Woodlands, and to the waterfall. The adder's-tongue and the ferns
green in the low damp fell. These plants now in perpetual motion from the current
of the air; in summer only moved by the drippings of the rocks. A cloudy day. (6)

However, these are in sharp contrast to entries such as March 31st — “31st. Walked” (11). The limited word count in the March 31st entry could of course suggest several things — that she was rushed that day or pre-occupied with something else, or that the walk was not of particular interest and so on. Yet importantly in March, as in other months, Wordsworth has written entries for all dates, indicating the importance placed on daily writing practice. Of all the things that happened on March 31st ‘walking’ is deemed most note-worthy. In addition, in these entries, she writes about walking at the exclusion of any other topic. As Merlin Coverley notes, in *The Art of Wandering* (2012), the entry “somehow seems a distillation of the entire journal, as if its principal activity is finally laid bare” (109). An example of a single sentence entry is March 30th: “30th. Walked I know not where” (11), chiming with Debord's now famous concept of *dérive*, the notion of drifting or deliberately getting ‘lost’. Another example is January 28th:

¹⁹ The transcribed print versions may be inaccurate. As Pamela Woof (2002) notes in her introduction to the Oxford World classics edition “The teasing problem with the Alfoxden Journal is that there is now no manuscript. Between Professor William Knight's readings of it in 1889, 1897, and possibly 1913, it has not been seen. We have to accept a reduced and somewhat unreliable text” (xxviii). Nevertheless, these abbreviated entries are the only impressions we have.

“28th. Walked only to the mill” (3), suggesting perhaps that there was only time to do a short walk, one which was also unsatisfactory.²⁰

After my intervention “went for a walk on a tuesday” I did not record the location in the line. Subsequent to the intervention and the writing of the line I have attempted to forget the exact location I walked in order to highlight the general experience of going for a walk on a Tuesday, rather than any experience of travelling to and from a particular place. Therefore, simultaneously, the line reminds me of the walk yet gives no clues as to where the place was. This stresses the significance of the overall event rather than its details. Moreover, as specific detail is lost, the line for me as reader of my own work, has more scope for revisitation.

I have also conducted many long-distance walks in the countryside which aim to disrupt the everyday on a minimal level. These long-distance walks focus primarily on *merging*, in order to make the landscape defamiliar. For example, in the intervention “walked around with bells” (19) an otherwise conventional long-distance walk was subverted very slightly by deliberately walking with two handbells in my pocket, which could neither be seen nor heard. Both the subversion of taking the bells on the walk and the refusal to use the objects for their common purpose transformed the environment.²¹ These types of ‘secret’ interventions are in

²⁰ Even slightly longer entries — such as Thursday 22nd May: “Thursday, 22nd. Walked to Chedder. Slept at Cross” (14), with its *sighting* of location and *measuring* of distance — require a more active reading process than those which are far longer.

²¹ Notice how similar a line like this is to several sentences in Wordsworth’s *Journals* such as September 10th from the ‘Grasmere Journals’: “After tea walked with French Beans to Mr Simpson’s” (39). Wordsworth would presumably think of this experience as conventional. If I were to perform this line it would be absurd since I would not normally walk with French beans. In *stack* a similar line to Wordsworth’s is “walked the beach alone saw a courgette¹” (14). The intervention involved me deliberately taking a courgette to the beach in order to see it at this location, an act which was non-normative.

part informed by drama theorist Augusto Boal and his concept of Invisible Theatre, which he describes in *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (1992). In Invisible Theatre a scenario is planned for performance in public with only the actors knowing that the event is being staged. Boal regards the scenarios performed in Invisible Theatre as research exercises designed to investigate how a ‘spectator’ — someone who is “at one and the same time Actor and Spectator” (xxx) — reacts to taboo issues.²² In *Games* Boal recounts a few scenarios that his group have performed including those which investigate racism and sexual harassment. In one performance actors boarded a train and acted out a scene in which a man ‘came onto’ a woman too strong, never revealing that the situation was an act. I have adapted Boal’s Invisible Theatre by planning scenarios which are minimal, that make populated environments defamiliar, and that are conducted without spectators. Thus, the interventions that I have carried out are relieved of the overtly political function of Invisible Theatre.

“walked around with bells” and similar interventions like “got to the same distance as him with a tub” (54) — in which I walked with a friend on a long-distance walk and deliberately carried a small Tupperware box in my bag — take a similar approach to some of the ‘textworks’ of the land artist Richard Long, yet in contrast to Long’s works this line is less precise. Long’s textworks are sometimes published as books and are also displayed in galleries, as well as on his website. “Crossing Stones” (1987) is exemplary of his textwork practice:

²² This type of practice has been used in television shows such as *Candid Camera* in which a script is performed in order to play a prank. Differently to Invisible Theatre, in *Candid Camera* the performance is revealed to the spectators after the performance.

CROSSING STONES

A STONE FROM ALDEBURGH BEACH ON THE EAST COAST CARRIED TO ABERYSTWYTH BEACH ON THE WEST COAST
 A STONE FROM ABERYSTWYTH BEACH ON THE WEST COAST CARRIED TO ALDEBURGH BEACH ON THE EAST COAST

A 626 MILE WALK IN 20 DAYS

ENGLAND WALES ENGLAND

1987

Long's common practice of walking 'as art' is usually conducted privately — like the interventions in *stack* — but afterwards documented either as text or photographs. His textual practice could be considered as a type of minimalist poem — a large event described in limited detail but nevertheless with precision. "Crossing Stones", like most of Long's textworks, is different to many lines in *stack* in that it is specific even though it uses a minimal amount of language to convey a general act.

2.2: CITY

I don't particularly enjoy walking in the city. However, by turning walks into interventions and written lines I have been able to change walks that I consider to be familiar and dull into those which are interesting. In *Full Catastrophe Living* (2013) Jon Kabat-Zinn, an expert in mindfulness, explains ways in which boring walks may be changed into positive experiences. Using the example of going shopping he suggests that "if we bring awareness to our walking during these routine tasks, it will short-circuit the automatic pilot mode, making our routine experiences more vivid and actually more interesting" (129). For example, the intervention "i went over to the garage for some snacks" (51) describes a walk to go and get snacks for a group of people from a petrol station in the evening. During the walk, by deliberately heightening my

awareness of the situation, I was able to turn this prospectively dull walk into a creative act, which resulted in writing a line for *stack*. At times my attempts to be mindful during dull walks simply hasn't worked, and in these cases I have not written any poetry. In contrast, some conventional experiences — such as “walked into a bar” (6) — have immediately been moments of elation. Spontaneous elation is a common experience of course. For example, the artist Lawrence Weiner, whose chief practice consists in conducting interventions, which are then recorded as large-scale minimal textual ‘sculptures’, has said: “The first part is what we call the epiphany. I can't explain why, one morning I'll wake up and be absolutely fascinated...by, say, concrete” (qtd. in Fietzek and Stemmrich 320). However, as my research has progressed I have grown more and more successful in making a conscious choice to heighten my awareness of the environment.

I have also conducted interventions that defamiliarise the landscape through the process of what I call ultra-micro-walking, which is to say where interventions involve walking hardly any distance at all. These are in high contrast to the epic walking tradition of Long and Dorothy, as well as William, Wordsworth.²³ The intervention “i went in and out of the shop” (94) involved me walking in and out of a shop in the space of a second or two, in order to work against the shop's normative function of selling or browsing. Boal explains the problems of using one's body in endlessly routine ways: “by always carrying out the same movements, each person mechanises their body to execute these movements as efficiently as possible, thus denying themselves the possibility of original action every time the opportunity arises” (*Games* 41). I have found conducting an ultra-micro-walk like “i went in and out of the shop” to be sufficient to subvert the body's ‘mechanised’ state in that moment, as well as in the reverberations that stem from the experience.

²³ I have also conducted ultra-micro-walks in the house and workplace as I will go on to illustrate.

Whilst “i went in and out of the shop” displays *merging* through a heightened awareness of body and place it also displays *reading* in its relationship to minimalist poems. Grenier’s single-line poems “kept on going to the corner store” (n.p.) and “time to go to the laundry again soon” (n.p.), both from *Sentences*, are particularly salient examples.²⁴ In *Conversation* Grenier says that “time to go to the laundry again soon” is something “I testify to as having value”. In “time to go to the laundry again soon” time is *measured* against the context of the task, and also against the bare words “time”, “again” and “soon”. As Ratcliffe notes “there’s a past, a present and a future implicit in this poem...the past is the time during which the laundry builds up in the basket, the present is the moment of the speaker speaking the line...the future is the going ‘soon’”.

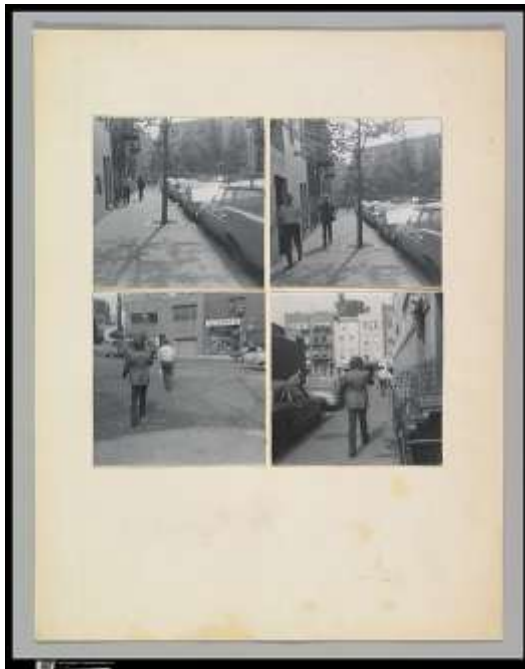
Silliman’s *Ketjak* also records everyday experiences. An example sentence from *Ketjak*, “The bottle of white wine is empty” (21, 44, 84), is typical of the poem and suggests a conventionality to Silliman’s interventions (presuming that at least some lines represent actual occurrences). In Epstein’s close reading of the poem he notes that “the details of daily life remain rather defiantly untransformed, neither aestheticized nor turned into metaphor or symbol” (*There is no Content* 736). However, whilst *stack* seemingly contains an greater number of non-normative experiences than *Ketjak* and *Sentences* it’s hard to treat the experiences in these two works as merely ‘daily life’ since our understanding of poetry and life are clearly being conflated.

Two other interventions recorded in *stack* involved planned walks to shops. These are documented in the lines “at a packet of beef” (17) and “by a pack of ham” (41). More precisely both interventions took place in supermarkets. In the interventions I took the packets rather than the supermarkets to be the destination of the walk. In each line the location is suggested

²⁴ A more detailed discussion of the structure of *Sentences* follows in Chapters 4 and 5.

by a preposition — “at” in one case and “by” in the other. Both walks had a clear focus which was to reach these packets and to stand next to them for an unspecified amount of time. These two interventions, like others in *stack*, are variations. In “at a packet of beef”, after conducting the intervention, I then did some shopping so that the pleasure of doing the intervention was tempered by carrying out an activity that is dull and routine (although framed as an intervention of course it was not dull or routine). On the other hand, in “by a pack of ham”, after standing by the pack of ham I left the shop without shopping, which felt more obviously an unusual experience.

These two ‘supermarket’ interventions have less in common with the practices in *Sentences* and *Ketjak* and more in common with works like the performance “Following Piece” (1969) by Vito Acconci and David Buuck’s blog post/poem “Follow” (2009). In “Following Piece” Acconci followed a stranger at random until they entered a building — a private space — at which point the following ceased. The event is recorded as a photograph:



In “Follow” Buuck “hired a private investigator to follow & photograph [him] at various times over a week in Jan 07, & to then send [him] his ‘report’”. Entries include “12:44 pm — Subject

observed through window standing and milling about. Photographs of movement obtained”. “Following” and “Follow” suggest that what on the surface looks like the same event can have been conducted in completely different ways. This is similar to my interventions “at a packet of beef” and “by a pack of ham”.

2.3: HOUSE

The way in which I conducted interventions when walking around my house (and on occasion the garden and the houses of others) was not so different from when walking in the three other environments, yet in many respects walks around the house were easier to carry out, as I had complete control of my time and the environment. Also, as my house is much smaller in scale than the other three environments — particularly the countryside and the city — the interventions have tended, with greater regularity, to be ultra-micro-walks. Once again the interventions have been conducted to familiarise and to defamiliarise the environment.

In his chapter “Going Upstairs”, from *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (2008), Kabat-Zinn explains that:

Going to the front door, answering the telephone, seeking out someone else in the house to speak with, going to the bathroom, can all be occasions to slow down and be more in touch with the present moment. (202-3)

This statement highlights the plethora of interventions that can be conducted around the house in order to heighten awareness of the everyday. Georges Perec states a similar point of view in his 1973 essay “Approaches to What”, collected in *Species of Space and Other Writings* (1997). Perec suggests that instead of letting our lives be dominated by the “front-page splash, the banner headlines” (209) we should get to know the lives we lead and the things around us. He

calls this awareness of the everyday the *infra-ordinaire*. Below is an abbreviated passage from “Approaches”:

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms...

Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out.

Question your tea spoons... (210)

A few examples in *stack* directly take up Perec’s challenges to “question your tea spoons”. In the line “teaspoons” (37) for instance I familiarised myself with my environment by conducting an intervention that I normally do. The intervention involved a walk to collect teaspoons from a kitchen drawer, to be laid out for dinner, and focused on that event in isolation. I also adapted Kabat-Zinn and Perec’s advice and conducted interventions in order to defamiliarise the environment. For example, “tea spoons a duck” (103) involved an ultra-micro-walk in which I gathered teaspoons and a duck figurine on a table and then observed them. This intervention certainly felt like something that was not part of the everyday. In the writing of these lines I played with the formation of the word ‘teaspoons’, using the process of *reading*. Whereas modern dictionary entries compound ‘teaspoons’ the translator of *Species of Space*, John Sturrock, does not.²⁵ In “tea spoons a duck”, using Sturrock’s non-compounded ‘tea spoons’, what was an intervention involving two items becomes a piece of writing which potentially lists three — “tea”, “spoons” and “a duck”. Other alternative readings are possible. For instance, we may treat the line as a peculiar piece of syntax in which a duck is ‘spooning’

²⁵ Presently, ‘tablespoon’ just like ‘teaspoon’, is compounded in the OED whereas ‘soup spoon’ and ‘dessert spoon’ are not — presumably a cosmetic decision.

tea, with culinary and erotic undertones, and so on. The remaining lines in which I ‘questioned my teaspoons’ are: “i placed a spoon on top of another spoon and it fell off” (62) — in which a teaspoon became an object in a task without purpose — as well as “i took a teaspoon to work” (107) — in which I changed both the landscape of the house and the workplace by removing a teaspoon from a drawer in my kitchen and leaving it in a drawer at work. Through these teaspoon interventions, and the writing of the lines, I was able experience original acts of embodiment as well as heighten my awareness of the teaspoons’ presence.

Differently, some lines in *stack* originated from chance encounters, such as “four pink caps” (20). This line was written after walking towards a CD player and the chance *sighting* and *measuring* of four pink bottle-caps. However, after the initial intervention, I later conducted planned walks to the bottle-caps, sometimes modifying their composition. This intervention took place twice more and is represented in the slightly different line “four pink caps again” (21).

During my research I have been interested in exploring whether the interventions I conduct happen ‘naturally’ or are fabricated. Some inspiration was taken from Perec’s six-page prose poem “Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four” (*Species of Space* 244-250). Below is an indicative extract:

Nine beef consommés, one iced cucumber soup, one mussel soup.

Two Guéméné andouilles, one jellied andouillette, one Italian charcuterie...” (244)

Taking aside the idea that elements of the poem are fictive, one wonders whether on occasion Perec modified his diet for the benefit of the poem. Likewise, Alexandra Nemerov’s poem “First My Motorola”, collected in Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology of conceptual poetry, *Against Expression* (2011), raises similar questions. According to them: “‘First My Motorola’

is a list of every brand she [Nemerov] touched over the course of a day in chronological order, from the moment she woke up until the moment she went to sleep” (457). Below is an extract (the whole poem runs to 214 lines):

First, my Motorola

Then my Frette

Then my Sonia Rykiel

Then my Bvulgari

Then my Asprey

Then my Cartier

Then my Kohler

Then my Brightsmile

Then my Cetaphil

Then my Braun

Then my Brightsmile (457)

As with “Attempt”, one can’t help but think that, because Nemerov consciously set out to make a poem, she might have added or rejected touching certain brands according to intuition, whim and in anticipation of how the written poem would work.

A poem which takes place in the house in its entirety, as opposed to “Attempt” and “First”, and which questions the imaginary, is Steven Zultanski’s volume-length poem *Pad* (2010). In meticulous detail Zultanski’s poem lists all the items that are in the poet’s flat and declares whether they “can” or “cannot” be lifted by his “dick”. Below is an extract:

My dick cannot lift the door. My dick can lift the white plastic end-table. My dick can lift the white plastic end-table which is stacked on the other white plastic end-table. My dick cannot lift, both at once, the two stacked white plastic end-tables. (1)

In the blurb he claims that the objects that are depicted in the poem are taken from real life and that the interventions took place: “*Pad* is a catalog of my attempt to lift each and every item in my apartment with my dick”. It is clearly possible that Zultanski could have tested whether his ‘dick’ could move the various objects. However, due to the scale and the nature of the acts one might speculate that Zultanski is fibbing a little. Regardless of the truth about *Pad* some lines in *stack* describe instances that were part real and part imagination. For instance, in the line “second movement round an imaginary miniature lemon” (34) I imagined one element of the environment (a miniature lemon) but also conducted the real event of moving around my kitchen (imagining a miniature lemon was there) and placing my attention on a particular moment in that movement, i.e. the second one. However, most of the lines in *stack* do describe events that did happen in reality, no matter how obliquely they are described.

2.4: WORKPLACE

The ultra-micro-walks that I have conducted in the workplace during working hours, as well as longer walks to and from work, are attempts to resist repetition.

The intervention “i move towards the stapler and look at it” (34) involved a conscious decision to use the last minutes of my lunch-break for creative purposes rather than letting them go to waste in preparing to go back to work. In the intervention, I walked about a total of a metre towards a stapler in an unpopulated room. The stapler was an object that was in the room by chance and which I engaged with through intuition. After choosing the stapler I then walked to it and observed it, turning my body into, as Solnit puts it, “a site of sensations, processes, and desires” (*Wanderlust* 28) and generating what Jacks calls *merging*. In doing this intervention I felt that time was being used purposefully. An intervention such as this suggests that any place, in which one has some time, is a possible place to be creative — albeit that

certain potentially creative acts are not permitted at work, such as playing loud music, getting drunk and so on. In the workplace, in order to conduct interventions, a minimalist approach is a useful one as free time is at a premium. Although lunchtime is a reasonably lengthy amount of ‘free time’ — forty minutes or so — I am restricted to an environmental radius of about one mile because of the time it takes to get somewhere and back on time.

The practice of pursuing leisure activities during working hours is common for employees, even at the micro level of catching a breath. De Certeau calls personal activities that are conducted during working hours *la perruque*. *La perruque* is translated as “the wig” (25) in the English translation, which effectively means ‘skiving’ — *la perruque* “is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer...It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job” (25). Key contemporary examples of *la perruque*, in which employees steal substantial amounts of time from employers, are using computers for private purposes and talking to others about non-work related matters. Whilst I have partaken in these activities they have never been done with any particular pleasure — they are often done in bitty ways and without structure. In *stack* however I have used *la perruque* to conduct interventions which interested me greatly. These interventions were always quick to carry out lest they should fail through interruption.

Interventions conducted during work hours include “i moved a seat” (11) and “walked past 34 stacked chairs and unstacked one of them” (69).²⁶ I view interventions that I have conducted at work both as acts of dissidence as well as opportunities to be creative, albeit done under restricted circumstances. To re-iterate, I can perform a quick intervention such as moving a seat in any environment but going on a long walk is not possible at work. Leisure time on the

²⁶ These examples of *la perruque* have something in common with fidgeting and daydreaming. However, fidgeting still suggests a state of boredom; day-dreaming a fantasy that is not likely to come to fruition.

other hand offers more opportunities for interventions than work does but as De Certeau notes *la perruque* offers “countless ways of ‘making do’” (29).

Work may also be considered as the time spent travelling to and from work — although in most instances this is non-contracted labour. The journey that people take to work is not one that they would normally do at any other time; it is repetitive and serves the function of arriving at work. My journey to work involves a walk of around two miles. To subvert the repetition of the walk I initially used different routes, *sighting* and *measuring* the differences. Soon of course these new routes quickly ran out. As a result I conducted minimal interventions on my walk in order to disrupt the flow, such as slipping, tripping and bumping into things. For example, “slipped walking up a ramp” (73) interrupted the chief function of the walk, which was to get me to work, modifying it into a creative act, one of *merging*.

Some of these interventions may also be thought of as the performance of non-normative ‘roles’. So, for example, the intervention “i tried to walk towards a cheese sandwich” (100), involved me ‘attempting’ but ‘failing’ to walk towards a cheese sandwich I saw littered on the pavement. This ‘failure’ saw me take on the role of someone who for some reason could not walk towards the sandwich. This type of role-playing is reminiscent of characters in Lars Von Trier’s film *The Idiots* (1998) in which a group of adults experiment with pretending to be mentally handicapped. In one illustrative scene the protagonists go to a restaurant where they play out their mentally handicapped roles without the other diners knowing it’s a ‘spoof’. Although *The Idiots* is a fiction, its investigation is notably similar to those carried out in Invisible Theatre. However, unlike in *The Idiots* and Invisible Theatre, I had no backstory to offer a reason for being unable to walk to the cheese sandwich, rather it was a spontaneous act. In addition, any people present would not know that I was unable to conduct the walk as it was carried out secretly.

Another similar fantasy I carried out is the intervention “you’re not allowed to go on that bandstand” (54). In the intervention I pretended that I was not allowed to walk on a bandstand which I was passing, again turning the walk into a creative act. These sorts of games are like the ways children play. For example, you might hear children saying ‘you can’t come near me as there is a force field around me’. Adults also play these games — games such as RPG and murder weekends — but so often only at allocated times. Playing is not encouraged enough, in contemporary society (as well as being often discouraged). In *stack* I have played as often as possible.

CHAPTER 3: TEXTUAL ATTRACTORS

Peter Stockwell’s concept of ‘textual attractors’ is found in his book *Texture — A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* (2009). Stockwell’s concerns are with ‘cognitive poetics’, a subsidiary of cognitive linguistics that analyses literature rather than other text types. Simply put, textual attractors is a method of reading that analyses how a writer’s language choices attract and hold a reader’s attention. However, as I shall go on to explain, the model of textual attractors also provides a superb framework for writers to use in an attempt to attract readers and to invoke “resonance” and “intensity” (17). *stack*’s use of language was developed and ratified by this reading framework, especially my use of nouns and sentence constructions. In *Texture* Stockwell offers a number of readings using textual attractors — not to minimalist poems, however.

All attractors which are highly resonant and intense Stockwell calls “good textual attractors” (25). Good attraction is created by foregrounded “elements that take the viewer’s attention” (20). By “viewer” Stockwell means a “reader” who is imagining pictures in their heads. By “elements” Stockwell means a broad scope of possible lexical, grammatical,

phonological and discourse structures that result in attraction. Good attractors create “a prolonged response, generating an aura of significance” (19).²⁷ Readers are attracted to certain parts of a text because of one, but usually more, of the twelve attractors which the language invokes. The twelve attractors are: “newness”, “agency”, “topicality” “empathetic recognisability”, “definiteness”, “activeness”, “brightness”, “fullness”, “largeness”, “height”, “nosiness” and “aesthetic distance from the norm” (25). Stockwell’s inventory is reproduced in full below:

- newness
(currency: the present moment of reading is more attractive than the previous moment)
- agency
(noun phrases in active position are better attractors than in passive position)
- topicality
(subject position confers attraction over object position)
- empathetic recognisability
(human speaker > human hearer > animal > object > abstraction)
- definiteness
(definite (‘the man’) > specific indefinite (‘a certain man’) > nonspecific indefinite — (‘any man’))
- activeness

²⁷ One might argue that short texts, which some might call minimal, such as click-bait, advertising slogans and tweets attract quickly and have large amounts of resonance and intensity but I would suggest that in general, in these cases, the resonance and intensity is not felt in terms of the text but in terms of the products and experiences that they point to.

(verbs denoting action, violence, passion, wilfulness, motivation or strength)

- brightness

(lightness or vivid colours being denoted over dimness or drabness)

- fullness

(richness, density, intensity or nutrition being denoted)

- largeness

(large objects being denoted, or a very long elaborated noun phrase used to denote)

- height

(objects that are above others, are higher than the perceiver, or which dominate)

- noisiness

(denoted phenomenon which are audially voluminous)

- aesthetic distance from the norm (beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance) (25)

Stockwell notes that resonance is “caused by a kind of psychic reverberation between two times, places, states, or spheres — one common and the other extraordinary.” To illustrate he hypothesises that “a Biblical epigraph for a poem about an empty school bus in a snowstorm resonates between the temporal and the eternal, lending the bus an aura of cosmic significance” (18). In *stack* reverberations are integrated in the line, as well as occurring in the enjambment between lines (considered in Chapter 4). However, for the purposes of brevity, I will only examine discrete lines in this chapter. For example, a line such as “a photo of you eating lunch” (13) resonates between the triviality of the event (the common world) and its significance as a marker of existence (the extraordinary world). However, all attractors are prone to “interference, damping, and decay” (19) meaning that resonance and intensity recede. Elements

of texts lose their aura as a reader grows accustomed to them. Yet, Stockwell states, “once invoked, attractors can be maintained in focus either positively by sustaining techniques or negatively by the absence of any shift devices” (20). Sustaining techniques are devices which rejuvenate elements of text in some way, whereas shift devices are elements which draw the reader away. Sustaining devices and/or absence of shift devices produce “textual persistence” that works best when literature is “textualised as noun phrases” which are close in focus or have “literal foregroundedness” (24). Lines in *stack* lend themselves to individual readings due to their relationship to the interventions which I have conducted (as outlined in Chapter 2) and due to the lack of overall linear progression in the poem.

Lines in *stack* could be said to display sustaining devices *as well as* an absence of shift devices. For example, from the point of view of sustaining devices, in the ‘one-word’ line “ice” (17) the lack of context and the fragmentary nature of the line allow the image to be open to high levels of change as the context is unknown. Concurrently or alternatively, the line also works in terms of absence of shift devices as there are no other signifiers to draw attention away, rather attention is, in Stockwell’s terms, “zoomed — that is focused inward with greater granularity or intensity” (31).

As a reader of *stack* I approach the line in both ways varyingly, and it is my intention that others read lines in this way. Although I admit that I have no control over how the text will be read, to treat minimalist poems as having both sustaining devices *and* absence of shift devices is an approach that minimalist poets and critics take. For example, in “Minimalism” Faville examines Grenier’s one-word, untitled poem, “JAR” from his collection *Series*. The poem, written in upper case letters, has no title. It appears on the page with one other poem — “Yonder” (n.p.) — which is titled and is three lines long (as far as I can tell “Yonder” has no relationship to “JAR” and is on the same page to save space). Faville considers “JAR” in a

variety of ways — as a sound poem, as an allusion to Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” and as verb and adjective phrases. Yet, to begin his exploration he considers the poem thusly:

Since it is not buttressed with any grammatical referents, but exists alone, separated from all other language (words), its isolation implies a regard which magnifies or reduces its possible significance as a "fragment" of speech.

The word, a noun, suggests that it points to, or stands for, the object to which it refers; but that referentiality is without qualification. Does the word *jar* stand for all jars, or just one particular jar? In a philosophical sense, all jars are jars, and nothing else. But not all jars are alike, and the generic jar may be elaborated into varieties of types and shapes and styles of jar(s). But the word jar, by itself, can't have all those meanings, or conversely, it can incorporate all the senses of (or versions of) jar, inside itself. Call it the *set of all possible jars* which exist in the universe.

Faville’s reading of the poem exemplifies the multiplicity of meanings a careful reader will make. In addition, his point of view suggests that the interpretations of “JAR” are far from exhaustive, which can be considered as Faville understanding there to be textual persistence in the poem (to use Stockwell’s terminology).²⁸

It is important to reiterate that attractors may be found in any style or structure of text. Yet *stack*, and much other minimalist poetry, generates *particularly* good textual attraction due

²⁸ Other practitioners working in the field could just as easily fulfill a similar argument. I am especially thinking of the large body of short minimalist poems by Saroyan and Andre, Silliman in *Ketjak*, the text sculpture of Weiner, as well as poems in more recent minimalist collections like William Minor’s *A Tree on the Outside* (2010) and Walker’s *Action Score Generator* (2015).

to the high level of resonance and intensity, and the textual persistence caused by the stylistic used. Of particular stylistic importance are the ways in which lines are constructed. In *stack* there are a number of lines that could be examined. However, two general line types seem highly pertinent to the project: object-based and sentence-based. Object-based lines regularly use common, shared language, in a minimal way, stripped of detail. In this way these lines name or, to use Jacks' term, "sight" things — "1000 goats" (19), "red purse" (55), "stairs" (94) and so on. Attractors particularly common to naming are — *newness*, *definiteness*, *brightness*, *fullness*, *largeness*, *height*, and *nosiness*. Lines which are sentence-based — those where an agent or implied agent is doing something, particularly to an object — include the commonplace, yet grammatically deficient, "should i had a nectarine before i go to bed" (22) and the unusual "a mime about tilting a pack of compost slightly" (49). Sentence-based lines often contain the same attractors that are generated by naming but due to having more content — at all language levels — have the potential to generate textual attraction in terms of most of the remaining attractors: *agency*, *topicality*, *empathetic recognisability*, and *activeness*.

Aesthetic distance from the norm — the remaining attractor not yet considered — can conceivably be generated in any line in *stack* or in any other text for that matter. Its attributes are "beautiful or ugly referents, dangerous referents, alien objects denoted, dissonance" (Stockwell 25). As a writer it is difficult to say whether this attractor will be generated since its generation is governed by any given reader's feeling towards what is signified rather than the use of particular word classes or clausal structures. Yet, as a reader of my own work, many of the lines have generated *aesthetic distance from the norm* and perhaps some readers will feel likewise.

Significantly in *stack*, in either line structure, attraction is maintained through devices that generate slowness including: fragments, grammatical disjunction, repetition and caesura.

The minimal level of context given in lines in *stack* is also significant resulting in high levels of polysemy and textual persistence.

“three | square | alarm | clocks” (8) is exemplary of an object-based line (as well as sighting/naming) and displays good textual attraction. If we treat the line as the phrase ‘three square alarm clocks’ we can see that it displays *newness* (this is a new image to the poem), *definiteness* (as there are three of them) *nosiness* (perhaps if they ring) and *fullness* (as they are solid, sturdy objects). To imagine the alarm clocks we must at the very least think of them as having a size and colour. Admittedly alarm clocks are not normally ‘large’ so the line does not display *largeness* but the clocks may well be thought of as being ‘bright’, thus displaying *brightness*.

Deciding which images to make, and deciding whether to keep, modify or exchange those images causes textual persistence. In the instance of “three | square | alarm | clocks” textual persistence is augmented by the use of white space and vertical bars that attempt to slow the speed at which the line is read. In addition, the vertical bars act like full stops so that in this reading we now have four separate objects — “three”, “square”, “alarm”, and “clocks”. These objects, which may or may not be in relationship to each other, cause a whole host of other types of images to be formed. In this alternative interpretation, which still has a limited amount of content, lines overtly and covertly generate attractors. So “square”, for example, overtly generates *newness* and *fullness* but in a covert fashion can generate *definiteness*, *brightness*, *largeness* and *height*. There are of course many other ways of combining the four words which, in this case, have been opened up by the white space and vertical bars.

Minimalist poets have traditionally named things using limited detail. Lax’s signature poetry does this. His untitled poem “one bird” (*Poems* 26), is a good example:

one bird

two birds

one bird

two birds

two birds

one bird

two birds

one bird

one bird

two birds

one bird

two birds

two birds

one bird

two birds

one bird

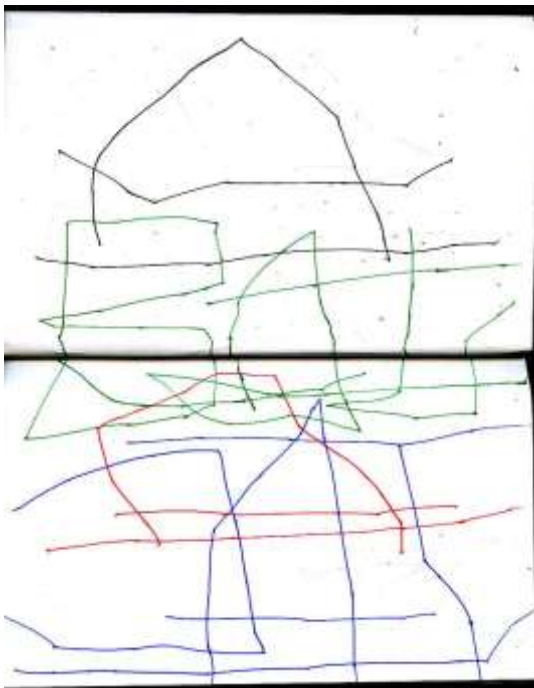
one

Although “one bird” uses different devices to “three | square | alarm | clocks”, the attractors and outcomes are similar. There is *newness* in the first two lines as “one bird” changes to “two birds”. In stanza three, although the lines from stanza one and two are repeated their position changes, which again creates ‘newness’. Readers can decide what the numbers in the poem mean resulting in *definiteness*. For example, the change from “one” to “two” could represent indecision, finally resulting in an act of decisiveness in the last line — “one”. Alternatively, but less likely, the poem could be a totting up of an amount of birds — 25 in total.²⁹ Readers may well treat the general signifier “bird” as a kind of ‘picture book’ bird. However, readers who are familiar with Lax’s work will feel that a specific species of bird inspired the poem — Lax knew the names of things in the natural world around him, as evidenced in accounts of his hermetic life on the Greek island of Patmos, such as Hauff’s study or Michael MacGregor’s *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (2015). Yet, other readers may choose to imagine a type of bird that has no obvious association with Lax — a dodo, an emu, an ostrich and so on. Another way to treat the poem in terms of *definiteness* is to say that the word “bird” displays all the definite qualities of birds in general — we imagine wings, feathers and a beak. Another of Lax’s poems “one stone” (*Poems: 1962-1997* 3) is similar to “one bird” and is described by minimalist poet Thomas A. Clark, in his essay “Words and Stones, Eloquence and Astonishment” (1999), as demonstrating “fact without context” (108). If we apply Clark’s

²⁹ Poems ‘about’ numbers are common to minimalist poetry. For example, see various poems by Saroyan written between 1960-1971 collected in *Complete Minimal Poems* (2007), Creeley’s famous “A Piece” from *Pieces* (1969) collected in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley* (2006), and Mark Truscott’s poems in *Said Like Reeds or Things* (2004) and *Nature* (2010) which riff off these aforementioned works. These poems echo children’s books which concern numbers. The work of Dr Seuss for example, in books like *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* (1960), bears many similarities.

statement to “one bird” and assume that Lax did see some birds before writing the poem, then, in that sense, what we are reading is ‘fact’ or many facts. This is to say that the poem is a description of the world as it was in some respects in a given moment. As Clark puts it “one stone” describes “not the stone’s particularity but the fact of its existence” (108). Lax’s own words are similar to Clark’s point of view. Lax told the *New York Quarterly* in 1986 that: “the reason I use a minimal vocabulary and a fairly limited number of images is that they may have a greater chance of being understood than would a more elaborate vocabulary, and a lot more recondite images” (qtd. in Spaeth *Robert Lax: An Overview of his Life and Work* 124). Similarly, when speaking to Zurbrugg, Lax said: “I felt that isolating a word would give it a chance to be absorbed for what it was” (27).

Grenier has also written many object-based poems. His most recent style of writing minimalist poems — his ‘drawing poems’ — use a method of writing that is unique to Grenier, which Ratcliffe has dubbed “scrawl” (*Listening* 119). The untitled poem “A BAT A BAT” is one such example of Grenier’s scrawl:



The poem once deciphered reads “A / Bat / A / Bat”. By its nature as an object-based poem it generates similar attractors to Lax’s “one bird”, as well as other object-based minimalist poems. However, the drawing poems, which Grenier started making with the ‘book in a box’ *What I Believe* (1988), are highly idiosyncratic in their methods of slowing and therefore textually persistent. “A BAT A BAT” describes, presumably, one bat twice or alternatively two bats. The phrase “a bat” generates *newness* when the poem is first read (this newness is renewed when repeated), *definiteness* (in the indefinite article “a”) and *noisiness* (in the *whoosh-swoop* sound bats make as they fly). In *On Natural Language* Ratcliffe examines the poem from a visual point of view — “the B...it could be a D or a sideways U...it’s missing some elements of the B”. Presuming we can decipher the poem, the slow reading process, assured by the scrawl, immerses us in the poem. Ratcliffe suggests that the scrawl in “A BAT A BAT” stands for the movement of one or more bats. He also speculates that the scrawl could symbolise the movement in any given drawing poem. Whilst this is an interesting spin on Grenier’s drawing poems what is certainly universal to them all is the manner in which the reader is obliged to ‘dwell’, as a result of the difficulty of reading them. Of course it is possible that we may find that certain drawing poems are completely illegible, like the handwriting of a five year old. Yet, more often than not, if we persevere, we get there in the end and are rewarded. Once the characters and the words can be deciphered — a first level of slowing — then we can dwell on any number of things. For example, Ratcliffe proposes we examine elements of the letters — the lower and upper case Ts, the number count of As and so on.³⁰ All these factors give the poem good textual persistence.

³⁰ As the words are repeated in “A BAT A BAT”, and there are very few letters in the poem, this drawing poem is easier to decipher than many others.

Sentence-based lines function differently to object-based lines and generate a greater number of attractors. As stated earlier sentence-based lines regularly generate the attractors that are produced by object-based lines — in addition they generate many of the remainder. This is easy to see by using the inventory since attractors such as *empathetic recognisability* and *agency* need more than just nouns to be generated. Without investigation this might make one think that persistence is less likely because “The Beholder’s Share” (Gombrich 153) is reduced, that the line’s content, and therefore the image, is more firmly set — the cohesion in sentence-based lines (that which Andre calls the super-referent) is in place.³¹ However, the context of sentence-based lines in *stack*, just like object-based lines, is still highly open-ended. Consider “i ate a grapefruit at a rock” (91). This line could be said to have a narrower frame of reference, compared to an object-based line, but still gives the reader minimal information. Perhaps a prototypical reading might suggest that a grapefruit is being eaten on a walk, ‘at a rock’. However, due to the absence of an overall context in the whole poem, one can only wonder under what circumstance was ‘a grapefruit eaten at a rock’.

On a final note, in addition to lines which suggest the everyday, there are lines which describe more unusual experiences. For instance, in the line “leaning next to a grapefruit” (8) the foregrounded element of “grapefruit” and “leaning” generates ‘dissonance’. ‘Dissonance’, which is an attribute of *aesthetic distance from the norm*, makes the grapefruit take an unusual signification, from its normal one of something eaten, to become something that is atypical —

³¹ Art historian E. H. Gombrich coined the term “The Beholder’s Share” in *Art and Illusion* (1991). For Gombrich ‘The Beholder’s Share’ is characteristic of the relationship between viewer and work of art from the Renaissance onwards. In relationship to Impressionism he states that “the artist gives the beholder increasingly ‘more to do’, he draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of ‘making’ which had once been the privilege of the artist” (169).

there can be no prototypicality in the event “leaning next to a grapefruit”. This atypicality contrasts with the ‘normativity’ of “i ate a grapefruit at a rock”.

CHAPTER 4: ENJAMBMENT

stack is a list of 918 lines. In addition to being discrete, these lines are composed through enjambment. In most cases — as mentioned in Chapter 2 — the lines represent interventions that I have conducted. The final number of lines in the poem is the product of aiming to fill roughly 100 pages, using a trade size book format (6 by 9 inches), ten-point font and significant spacing between lines. Single author poetry collections are usually around this length and size, and *stack* was designed with this in mind. Writing a poem of this length allowed me to explore, in detail, several ways in which lines can be enjambed in the context of minimalist poetry. In addition, the length of the poem has also allowed me to explore many ways of pursuing other textual approaches and, at times, ways of conducting interventions.

As already mentioned, the poem is structured so that after each line a gap follows, and after that another line — this is a consistent approach. The gap size between the lines allows them to be read as discrete entities or as two or more conjoined units. Enjambment is yet another means of creating indeterminacy in the poem resulting in attention being focused on the line as well as conjoined units, and producing myriad ways in which the poem can be navigated. I also wanted the lines to run flush with each other so that the poem does not look like a random list. This was easy enough to achieve when lines run no longer than the margin, however in a small number of cases in *stack* lines do. I solved this problem, to some extent, by using an invisible table, so that a total of nine lines appear per page, each of which begin in the same position. Lines that do run over the margin take up some of the space that the gaps

produce. To re-iterate, crucially, the size of the space between the lines needed to be ample for lines to be treated discretely as well as conjoined.

After I wrote a line I inserted it into the list of lines, using a collage process. Placement of lines was done partly through intuition. Yet, often lines were written with specific syntax in mind, in order that other specific syntaxes were generated when enjambed. I also edited the poem *throughout* the course of my research, removing many lines that had failed as written pieces or as interventions (not because they failed to work at the level of enjambment). For example, I removed the line “a light the other side”. This was an intervention that involved using lamps and putting my body in different positions to them. Although I was happy with the intervention I felt that the line sounded too metaphorical — not an effect I wish the lines to have. I did not attempt to rewrite this line as it felt tainted. On the other hand, some lines were removed on the basis that the intervention was unsuccessful. For example, “mug handle and tree” was removed after reflecting that the intervention was ‘forced’ and held no ‘charge’. Once I had filled around 100 pages I then edited the text, removed any more lines that I felt had failed — as interventions or as pieces of writing — and then the poem was finished.

stack is written in lines as opposed to prose. T. V. F. Brogan’s entry on “The Line”, in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, states that the line is “segmented into elements” whereas “prose flows continuously” (694). By segmented he means that there are line breaks, which are indicated visually by an excess of white space to the right, left, or both right and left of the line. In *stack* this segmentation is amplified by the gaps between lines, and the absence of narrative coherence and overall logical progression. Of course, in the past the line has been defined by poetry that has clear metrical structuring and that normally uses end rhyme patterns. Yet, in the last 150 years or so there have been radical breaks with this tradition in various modernist and post-modernist poetries such as English and American free verse.

The lines in *stack* do not have a consistent meter or end rhyme structure. On a case-by-case basis they could be examined for prosodic features but the poem was not written with this in mind. Furthermore, it is important to take note that there are no sentences in *stack*, only lines. By this I mean sentences in a conventional sense that have the following four attributes — capital letters at the beginning, full stops at the end, and both subject and verb. Whilst some lines omit at least one of subject or verb, the most striking elements that are omitted — throughout the poem — are capital letters and full stops, resulting in enjambment, in the broadest sense, occurring at the end of every line.

In Brogan and Clive Scott's entry "Enjambment" in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* they cryptically describe enjambment as the "Non-alignment of (end of) metrical frame and syntactic period at a line end: the overflow into the following poetic line of a syntactic phrase (with its intonational contour) begun in the preceding line without a major juncture or pause" (359). In simpler terms the word, from the French, can be translated variously using words from the field of 'crossing over' — Brogan and Scott use the term "overflow." Another common translation is 'to straddle', which suggests an effect where lines are sensed as separate to one another *and* as conjoined units — like putting one's legs either side of a border. As Brogan and Scott suggest — using the term "noncoincidence" to mean the failure for line and sentence to agree — "in reading, the noncoincidence of the frames of syntax and meter in e.[njambment] has the effect of giving the reader 'mixed messages'" (359). 'To bridge', another way of translating the term, suggests an assimilated link between lines. Useful in contrast to straddle, is 'to run on' which describes the effect in its most obvious sense: "the obvious incompleteness of the syntactic period says, *go on*" (359). In contrast to this explanation, in *stack*, there are lines, which even though not end-stopped through punctuation, don't run on syntactically but rather are connected through parataxis, defined in a poetic sense as the

juxtaposition of lines that are not connected grammatically. I shall refer to paratactic lines sporadically and target them at the end of this chapter.

In his essay “Verse and Voice” (1990), Charles O. Hartman uses the term “counterpoint” to describe how, “especially between the line and the sentence”, in free or metrical verse, one encounters a “heightened sense of layered experience in the reading” (133). He tentatively proposes that counterpoint “is even more readily available in metrical verse than in free verse because the system of the line is more obviously systematic. The steadiness of the meter strengthens the feeling of enjambment” (134). In a previous study, *Free Verse* (1980), he argues that much modernist poetry may not “so much counterpoint syntax as explode it” (152), since much of it avoids “syntactical commitment” (153).

Of key importance to me are Hartman’s use of the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ enjambment. These are labels which refer to the syntactical structure of the line. Lines which are dependent clauses or incomplete — that are fragments (or have grammatical deficiencies) — are examples of strong enjambment. Conversely then, lines which are independent clauses are examples of weak enjambment. In strong enjambment, because the line is not a complete sentence, we must run on. This is the opposite of lines which are weak enjambment, as they are complete independent clauses by the end of the line. In weak enjambment, even though there is no punctuation at the end of the line, we are tricked, if only momentarily, into believing that the line has come to an end, resulting in a delay which does not take place in strong enjambment. In Andrew Marvell’s metrical poem “A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body” Hartman identifies that in the break “[Here blinded with an eye;] and there / Deaf” is strong; *we know* something else is coming”. On the other hand, he notes that: “The break between the two last lines of the stanza [‘Tortured, besides each other part, / In a vain head,

and double heart.’] exemplifies a weak enjambment; the syntax permits a cleaner division after ‘other part,’ and the lines pose with greater independence” (*Verse* 133).³²

In accordance with these terms I have used a mixture of strong and weak enjambment in *stack*. Some lines in the poem are independent clauses and therefore demonstrate weak enjambment, such as “wrote about a small pigeon” which is followed by “after drinks” (16). Other lines are dependent clauses or fragments, and typically these lines would fall under strong enjambment since normally we would read on until sentence completion. Examples include the imperative “sellotape / a huge thing” (7) or strong enjambment that never reaches syntactical completion “red / twig and plastic exercise/ a bit of plastic” (58). However, I propose that lines in *stack* that are examples of strong enjambment can also function in a similar way to those which are *bone fide* weak enjambment. Due to the lack of overall logical progression within *stack* many lines that are dependent clauses — or fragments — may be treated as ‘making sense’ on their own, causing hesitation, which is like that initiated by weak enjambment.

For Hartman, in relationship to the Marvell poem, and in other examples of traditional verse, strong enjambment makes us more aware of sentence and line systems than weak enjambment does:

But enjambments are not isolated events. They are points at which the system of sentence intersects and interferes with the system of the lines, where verse and syntax cross each other. When the two coincide—when they agree about where the voice should divide the stream of speech, as here at the ends of couplets—we hear ‘weak enjambment’ or none. Where the continuity that one system makes us

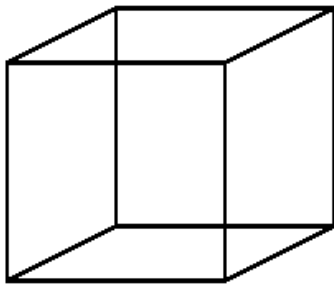
³² These terms are modifications or descriptions of the classical terms *rejet* (weak enjambment) and *contre-rejet* (strong enjambment).

expect is interrupted by the other system, what we call the ‘strong enjambment’

makes us much more conscious of the presence of both systems. (133)

But you could just as easily say that it is the other way around — that weak enjambment also interrupts the systems of verse and syntax, just as we could easily say that end-stopped lines make us more aware of both systems. What is perhaps more banal to say, yet realistic, is that the line can be used in many ways to generate multiple syntactical possibilities.³³

In *stack* there are a number of syntactical constructions which occur over units of two or more lines. These are often read concurrently, leading to a conflict of meaning or ‘mixed messages’. Brogan describes how “in reading, the mind makes projections, in that pause, based upon what has come before, about what word is most likely to appear at the beginning of the next l.[ine], expectations which a masterful poet will deliberately thwart, forcing rapid rereading” (695). Optical illusions are a good way of thinking about how a conflict of meaning occurs, and we may think along the lines of the Necker cube, where no image will stick — we flit:



³³ However, in some contemporary poetry which is written in verse, the presence of both systems — line and sentence — is not discernible. Marjorie Perloff, for example, suggests that the use of enjambment in some poetry displays “linear fallacy” (qtd. in Brogan 696) — by which she means that some poets deploy the line merely to produce left-aligned, essentially rectangular poems — the choice of preference in much so-called ‘mainstream’ poetry. At the other end of the spectrum there are many examples of contemporary poetry where the line is not used; where poetry is written in prose or other non-linear systems such as digital hypertext.

In the case of *stack* thwarting doesn't just occur over two-line units but throughout the entire poem — all 918 lines.

The overall structure of *stack* was initially informed by Grenier's *Sentences*. *Sentences* comes in both print and electronic versions. The print version of *Sentences* is published as 500 unbound index cards housed in a box, most of them with a sentence or two per card. It comes in an order of sorts as Bob Perelman points out in *The Marginalization of Poetry* (1996) — “In its original order the box contained one blank card (frontpiece); a title card: “*SENTENCES ROBERT GRENIER*”; a copyright card; then 500 poems. At the end (that is, on the bottom) was a blank card with colophon information” (46). Many of the poems in *Sentences* are not composed using a standard definition of the sentence. The text on any given card rarely begins with a capital letter, or ends with a full stop. In addition, many of the ‘sentences’ do not contain verbs or nouns, or make conventional grammatical sense. The cards raise questions about the extent to which the definition of a sentence may be stretched. It is not hard therefore to describe poems in *Sentences* as being composed of lines, often the proverbial ‘one-liner’. In addition, because the poems are printed on unbound index cards they may be treated as units which may be conjoined, or at least read in an order of the reader's choosing. If this is the case, then in two card units alone, the possible combinations of the text amounts to 125,000. A complete set of all combinations is 1134 digits long.³⁴ As Silliman notes in his essay “Sentences” in *The New Sentence*, the poem's “scope is panoramic on a scale not dreamed of since Whitman” (170). Some of these combinations give new meaning. For example, the two cards “we had bottles of Canadian beer” (n.p.) and “close to the door” (n.p.) can form “we had bottles of Canadian beer / close to the door” or, flipped around, “close to the door / we had bottles of Canadian beer”.

³⁴ The calculation is 500x499x498x...x1.

In contrast, some card combinations in *Sentences* do not make new poems — this is especially the case where individual cards have lots of text on them and a title:

AMY

I wish I had

some shoes

without

thumbs (n.p.)

and

a port to a green (n.p.)

As a concept, the combining of cards is highly interesting but as a reading endeavour it is impossible to complete all readings in one's life time. Read as conjoined units, *Sentences* certainly gives choices to its reader (something I wanted to do in *stack*). It suggests a colossal number of ways of navigating the poem, as well as a multiplicity of possible images and narratives, akin to a 'choose your own adventure' book. The amount of choices however seems overwhelming to my mind and to Grenier's too in fact who in an interview said:

you could build up some kind of continuum which wasn't a series but was some kind of made juxtaposition of separate elements. But I've never actually been interested in build-up of the more-than-one. I always liked the oneness of whatever something is, in itself. I've been puzzled by the problem of assembling the single things, which have their own integrity, if you look at them — and after all, it keeps you from being devoured by the onrush of "multi-tasking"

responsibilities. I like to look at things singly, and think about them multiply. I don't like to pile too much stuff up on top of each other, because I get dizzy and actually I can't think anymore. (*Farming the Words* 39)³⁵

stack is a more rigid composition but it is certainly not set up in opposition to *Sentences* — it simply offers an alternative way in which discrete minimal lines may work as larger units.

I have written lines, which when enjambed, generate the following syntactical constructions:

- Listing
- Sentence completion — through introduction of a verb
- Sentences extension through prepositional phrases
- Simple sentence extension by changing syntax from Subject Verb (SV) to Subject Verb Object (SVO)
- Alternative syntactical constructions caused by ambiguity of word class
- The formation of sentences allowing for minor ellipsis
- No syntactic link can be made — lines are only linked through parataxis

³⁵ Similar projects include Oulipian poet Raymond Queneau's 1961 poem *Cent Millions de Poèmes* (2014) and artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "33 Questions Per Minute" (2000). *Cent Millions de Poèmes* is a set of ten sonnets in which all lines can be shuffled, in all combinations, resulting in 100,000,000,000,000 different poems which would take millions of years to read. Hemmer describes "33 Questions Per Minute" on his website: "33 Questions Per Minute" consists of a computer program which uses grammatical rules to combine words from a dictionary and generate 55 billion unique, fortuitous questions. The automated questions are presented at a rate of 33 per minute—the threshold of legibility—on 21 tiny LCD screens encrusted on the support columns of the exhibition hall or mounted on a wall. The system will take over 3,000 years to ask all possible questions. A keyboard allows participants to log on to the building and add their own questions to the automatic flow."

As I describe how line units, which are composed of two or more lines, function when enjambed, I will sometimes briefly describe the interventions that took place. I do this in order to demonstrate how, from a writer's point of view, the lines (the representations of the interventions) have completely different contexts to enjambed combinations. I would add that, regardless of my own knowledge of the poem, any reader can discern that a line and a unit of lines have different meanings in this poem, or indeed any other.

4.1: LISTING

As expressed earlier the whole poem is a list — a list of 918 interventions. In *The List Poem* (2000) — a manual of teaching methods and also an anthology of examples — poet and teacher Larry Fagin discusses a number of ways in which list poems may be formed. Using Fagin's terms the most predominantly used list poem type in *stack* are the 'divergent' and the 'hodgepodge'. 'Divergent' seems closest for describing the overall construction of *stack*. Fagin uses a poem by Susan Timmons to demonstrate listing by divergence, reproduced below:

Traditionally a list poem bears a direct and understandable relation to that poem.

Contemporary poet Susan Timmons's "Poem" doesn't do that. In it, her list of British writers and the rest of the text seem to veer away from each other. The reader is tempted to fill the gap by imagining the connection between the two parts.:

Poem

Cause I want crinkled foil and water
 CHAUCER and rose petals, are additionally desirable
 SHAKESPEARE and also able to look over at
 SPENSER shadows on lawn of
 stately Arkansas statehood.
 BLAKE
 KEATS (190)

In *stack* one might say that all lines are connected by virtue of being based around interventions. However, the interventions described diverge because of the range of themes under which they fall. Yet, within clusters of line units there appear to be lines that *are* linked by theme. Fagin labels thematically linked list-poems as ‘hodgepodges’. He gives the example of a poem written by various fourth and fifth graders, “Ten Things I’ll Need on a Desert Island” (193-194), which lists ten things which are typical of such a scenario. Fagin offers no definition of hodgepodges (he writes that no explanation is necessary) but I would define them as ‘a list of things which are connected to the title of the poem’. Hodgepodges in *stack* are adaptations of this list-poem type because clusters of lines are never framed by titles. “4 forks / 1 knife / 6 beers / no wine” (83) is an example of a hodgepodge list in *stack*. The lines allude to Grenier’s poem “EMILY”:

EMILY

3 forks

1 knife

a beer

a cider (*Sentences* n.p.)

In my sequence in *stack* I use similar vocabulary to Grenier’s poem, even keeping one of the lines exactly the same. My lines however represent four separate interventions — conducted on separate occasions — which have then been collaged into a sequence. After this hodgepodge list I diverge in the next line — “i threw the last one away” (83). “i threw the last one away” could be treated as being completely unrelated to what has come before or as being an explanation of there being “no wine”. I also allude to my own four-line enjambed sequence later on in *stack* by transforming the four lines into a single line — “4 forks 1 knife 6 beers no

wine” (91). In addition, it should be remembered that as a single line “4 forks 1 knife 6 beers no wine” records an intervention which is entirely different from the four interventions represented in the four lines “4 forks / 1 knife / 6 beers / no wine”.

Whereas the four-line sequence “4 forks / 1 knife / 6 beers / no wine” might easily be grouped as ‘things found in the kitchen’ other hodgepodes in *stack* are less clearly connected — for example the sequence of lines “a photo of you eating lunch / a picture of me saying all the tobacco’s run out / a pebble and a red moon / a man holding an electrical box” (13). The cluster is made somewhat prominent by the repetition of the indefinite article/noun construction (i.e. ‘a such and such’). In addition, in the first three lines the first nouns start with a ‘p’ which adds texture to this repetition. Yet, because this four-line example has no title to frame it connections are unclear. Moreover, as with other hodgepodes in *stack*, the sequence quickly diverges away into other enjambment types — in this case the last line of this sequence combines with the next to form a complex sentence — “a man holding an electrical box / looked at a dustbin” (13).

4.2: SENTENCE COMPLETION THROUGH INTRODUCTION OF VERB

Some lines that are not sentences become sentences over two or three-line units, and describe both possible and impossible scenarios. Regardless of the possibility or impossibility of these multiple line units none of them took place — neither the possible “a man with an electric box / looked at a dustbin” (11) nor the impossible “the mountain / says an expensive plate” (94) nor the unlikely “some tuna on the floor / looked at a tub” (40). This last example is in contrast with a discrete line/intervention that might be deemed absurd but that did take place such as “a mime about tilting a pack of compost slightly” (49).

Some lines, which fall under this construction and that run over three or more lines, may begin plausibly but then deteriorate into the farcical and generate alternative readings. A good example is “1000 goats / walked around with bells / walked around without a blue pen” (19-20) (which may be made into a complete sentence by inserting a conjunction, comma, semi-colon or dash to link the third line). The first part of the sentence — “1000 goats / walked around with bells” — sounds in some ways normal but then becomes incongruous when the third line is connected through enjambment. It is totally normal for goats to walk “around with bells”. It is just as ‘normal’, although peculiar to note, that they should be “without a blue pen” (whether ‘pen’ implies a writing instrument or an enclosure). This contrasts with combinations such as the opening lines of *stack* — “rocks / walked into a bar” (6) — which, if read as a sentence, is an impossible scenario.

4.3: SENTENCE EXTENSION THROUGH PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

In some lines prepositional phrases occur both before and after lines that are complete clauses — for example this is the case in “saw a bicycle / in a shop / a man did not trip up in front of me” (17-18). If we split the lines into two-line units we have normative units such as ‘saw a bicycle / in a shop’ and the more incongruous ‘in a shop / a man did not trip up in front of me.’ Saroyan’s poem “something moving in the garden a cat” (n.p.), from his collection *Pages* (1969), is similar in this respect, where the counterpoint happens within the line rather than in the line break. As Hartman points out “There are counterpoints within lines, as well as between them” (*Verse* 134). The poem is a single-line poem centred on the middle of the page and has the following ‘sense-making’ permutations if we split the line variously:

something / moving / in the garden / a cat

something / moving / in the garden a cat

something moving / in the garden / a cat

something moving / in the garden a cat

something moving in / the garden / a cat

something moving in the garden / a cat

The range of reading possibilities is suggested to the reader because of the poem's lack of clear termination. One could say that all the permutations above amount to the same thing, such as the complete sense-making declarative sentence: 'There is something moving in the garden: it is a cat'. However, one's engagement with signifier and signified would be limited if my 'smoothed' construction were in actual fact the poem. Also, there are other ways to fill in the poem's 'gaps', such as intonating the poem as a question. Another way would be to imagine that the poem represents two sentences that bear no direct relationship to each other: 'There is something moving. In the garden there is a cat' Moreover, stranger splits are suggested by the imprecision of the poem, for example 'something moving in / the / garden a cat'? In this construction 'something moving in' has paranoid undertones, 'the' is stranded and becomes self-reflexive and finally a surreal metaphor is coined: '[to] garden a cat'.

4.4: SIMPLE SENTENCE EXTENSION BY CHANGING SYNTAX FROM SUBJECT VERB (SV) TO SUBJECT VERB OBJECT (SVO)

In some lines sentences are formed by subject and verb alone. The sentences in these lines can sometimes be extended through enjambment, by the addition of an object. For instance, this happens in: "i watched / a party without a log" (50). In the first line, weak enjambment is apparent as the line could be a conventional sentence — it has subject, verb and it makes conventional grammatical sense. Yet what it could mean, or what is being watched, is highly oblique. Nevertheless, as weak enjambment, the word or concept of 'watched' is stressed.

When enjambed with the next line — “a party without a log” — the combination is incongruous. “a party without a log” seems a peculiar event — that ‘the party’ is being ‘watched’ further adds to this peculiarity. Again, it is worth noting that an enjambed unit such as “i watched / a party without a log” is in fact similar to the sorts of interventions that I did actually conduct.

4.5: ALTERNATIVE SYNTACTICAL CONSTRUCTIONS CAUSED BY AMBIGUITY OF WORD CLASS

I have used this type of enjambment in a few places, for example in the line units “in the gallery / blackbird / dabs / bicycle barrier” (43). Here, treating “dabs” as a noun, a hodgepodge list is created under the category ‘things “in the gallery”’. Alternatively, as a SVO sequence — where ‘dabs’ is a verb — the unit is idiomatically like a newspaper headline i.e. ‘London: man kills vicar’. Throughout *stack* of course various types of syntax are created by the variety of types of enjambment. This is unlike a minimalist poem that uses this type of enjambment exclusively such as John Rowan’s tight, short, untitled poem “People Love Cancer”, from *Red, white, blue* (1970):

PEOPLE

LOVE

CANCER (n.p.)

The three lines could be taken as a list of three nouns. In this interpretation the lines form a hodgepodge list of things that have no clear categorisation, devoid of super-referent. However, the poem is also clearly intended to be read as a complete SVO simple sentence. Mixed messages or counterpoint, occur not only through the ambiguity of word class — where “love”

is treated as a verb — but also through the marked difference in the upbeat two-line unit “People / Love” and the strange and morbid three-line unit “People / Love / Cancer”.

4.6 THE FORMATION OF SENTENCES ALLOWING FOR MINOR ELLIPSIS

It will have already been noticed that, at times, in order that some lines are treated as being syntactically cohesive, I have imagined that words are omitted and then scaffolded the lines. This is the case in: “a one and a half litre bottle of shampoo / pink” (75) where one could imagine that after “shampoo” either a verb, relative clause and verb, dash or colon is added. Also in another case, such as “leaning next to a grapefruit / bought an electrical item with the wrong lead” (8), it could be that the two lines form a sentence, fronted by a subordinate clause, with the subject omitted between the two lines, as in: “leaning next to a grapefruit / [I] bought an electrical item with the wrong lead” or “leaning next to a grapefruit / [James] bought an electrical item with the wrong lead”.

Of course, we could add words *ad infinitum* to *stack*. One could argue that this process of reading by adding words is no more apparent than any other ‘hidden’ reading processes, such as its opposite — erasing them. However, because after every single line enjambment does occur, the connection between lines must be managed by the reader in some way. A two-line unit, such as “leaning next to a grapefruit / bought an electrical item with the wrong lead”, could be treated as paratactic. However, a hypotactic reading seems more likely since there is so little missing from the two lines in order for it to become a complete sentence.

4.7: NO SYNTACTIC LINK CAN BE MADE — LINES ARE ONLY LINKED THROUGH PARATAXIS

The use of parataxis presents another layer of texturing in the overall list; another “poetic bump in the road” (25) as Fagin would put it. Lines which are joined through parataxis act like end-stopped lines, even though there is no end punctuation in the poem, since they do not run on in a syntactic sense. However, often paratactic line clusters can be joined syntactically with the addition of one or two words as noted in section 4.6. It is easier in some line clusters than others to make this leap. For example, in “piglet jumping / glass twix” (9), if I had used ‘sentence extension by subordinate prepositional phrase’, I could have formed the surreal or unusual ‘piglet jumping near a glass twix’. One could also add alternative prepositional phrases that would change the context. On the other hand, a line combination such as “in the top room it is a pleasure / learned about a dog wastebin” (21) is far trickier to combine syntactically. Yet, if one tries, there are links to be made, such as the syntactically sound but nonsensical statement: “in the top room it is a pleasure [she] learned about a dog wastebin”. These sorts of readings are farfetched.³⁶

To summarise, to some extent the composition of lines in *stack* indicates how the poem may be navigated. Yet, clear lines of navigation are tempered because of the range of enjambment used and, to return to Hartman, due to the poem’s avoidance of “syntactical commitment” (153).

³⁶ For example, parsed in the same syntax, a sentence that is awkward but makes sense is ‘in the top room it is a pleasure she learned about the new house.’

CHAPTER 5: CROSS-REFERENCING

Cross-referencing, used creatively, is a style that can create disruption and slowness and was therefore a method that I have been keen to use in *stack*. *stack* uses two methods of cross-referencing — footnotes and repetition. Footnotes in *stack* are used in both normative and non-normative ways. Repetition in *stack* occurs in lines which are exact duplications or near misses. I use footnoting and repetition with no clear system, attempting to create highly oblique texturing.

5.1: FOOTNOTING

In *No Medium* (2013), Craig Dworkin points out that the use of non-normative footnoting in creative texts can create defamiliarisation because the inclusion of footnotes “slows the reader’s habitual consumption of the communicative content” (66). The standard way to read a poem is from left to right, from start to finish until the poem makes sense, until an image, argument or narrative is followed through. This limited way of reading has been challenged regularly and variously by modernist and post-modernist schools, which means that many readers are *au fait* with the proposition that any text can (and must) have multiple types of structure and therefore be open to multiple readings. The use of creative footnoting is one means by which standard reading methods can be challenged.

In *stack* I use a conventional footnoting system in which an indicator in the body of the text flags that a note is at the foot of the page. I do this by employing Arabic numerals. The note is positioned under a line. Against convention the note is the same size as the rest of the text in order to suggest that ‘main text’ and note are of equal importance. Occasionally I break with this system by using an indicator that has no note associated with it.

Footnotes in *stack* slow down the reading process as the reader is taken away from the main text. The indicator in the opening line, “rocks¹” (6), works in a conventional way and leads to a footnote. The text in the footnote also reads “rocks¹” (6), mirroring the line exactly. The indicator in the footnote however does not adhere to any regular system of footnoting “by obviating the intended communicative value of the notes in their original context and frustrating their functional utility” (Dworkin 66-67). Since the footnote is dysfunctional it is highly open to interpretation. For example, another footnote could be being referred to, in or outside the poem, or alternatively the footnote could be treated as being a dead end. In any event, because of these quandaries, slowness/heightened attention is manifested. Footnotes used in a standard way are often treated as being optional, ancillary or even superfluous. However, in *stack* I try to stress their importance by creating a degree of equalisation with the line, what one might even see as a merger.

The use of footnotes in *stack* can be considered using Stephen Bann’s notion of *transumption*, as applied by Botha in “Persistence”. For Bann transumption is “a poetics involving transference from one part or place to another, and marking that transference in a material way” (14). Botha notes that acts of minimalist transumption can be “expressed by three principal types of modalities: containment, distension and distribution” (371). In *stack* — in terms of footnoting — it is the first two modalities of the triplet which are most prevalent. For example, the first line “rocks¹” and its footnote “rocks¹” is an example of containment: “eschewing external reference and being occupied self-reflexively” (372) and also of distension: “art which attempts to grasp its own processual taking-place” (382). Botha describes distribution as “the constructive role of the perceiver in defining the parameters of the artwork” (390). This is a possible way a reader might read any of the footnotes, however the first two modalities seem more likely due to words often being repeated in the footnote —

suggesting containment — or being blank or dysfunctional such as the line “rocks¹” (72), which has the footnote “1¹”, suggesting distension.

Vito Acconci’s short untitled poem beginning “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” (*Language to Cover a Page* 33), first published in 1969, in issue 5 of *0-9* magazine, highlights Bann’s notion of transumption as a causation of the footnote. The poem is also an example of how the reading process can be slowed down:

Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,² basins,³ baskets,⁴ birds,⁵ boards,⁶ boats,⁷ boots,⁸
 bottles,⁹ boxes,¹⁰ branches,¹¹ bricks,¹² brushes,¹³ cakes,¹⁴ cards,¹⁵ carriages,¹⁶
 cats,¹⁷ chests,¹⁸ clocks,¹⁹ coats,²⁰ combs,²¹ cords,²² cushions,²³ dogs,²⁴ doors,²⁵
 drawers,²⁶ drops,²⁷ ears,²⁸ eggs,²⁹ engines,³⁰ farms,³¹ feathers,³² fish,³³ flags,³⁴
 floors,³⁵ forks,³⁶ frames,³⁷ gardens,³⁸ gloves,³⁹ goats,⁴⁰ hair,⁴¹ hammers,⁴² hats,⁴³
 hooks,⁴⁴ horns,⁴⁵ houses,⁴⁶ islands,⁴⁷ jewels,⁴⁸ kettles,⁴⁹ keys,⁵⁰ knives,⁵¹ leaves,⁵²
 legs,⁵³ lines,⁵⁴ locks,⁵⁵ maps,⁵⁶ matches,⁵⁷ mouths,⁵⁸ muscles,⁵⁹ nails,⁶⁰ necks,⁶¹
 nets,⁶² offices,⁶³ oranges,⁶⁴ ovens,⁶⁵ parcels,⁶⁶ pins,⁶⁷ pipes,⁶⁸ planes,⁶⁹ plates,⁷⁰
 pockets,⁷¹ pumps,⁷² rails,⁷³ receipts,⁷⁴ rings,⁷⁵ rods,⁷⁶ roofs,⁷⁷ sails,⁷⁸ scissors,⁷⁹
 seeds,⁸⁰ shelves,⁸¹ ships,⁸² shirts,⁸³ sponges,⁸⁴ springs,⁸⁵ stations,⁸⁶ stems,⁸⁷
 sticks,⁸⁸ stores,⁸⁹ tables,⁹⁰ threads,⁹¹ tickets,⁹² trains,⁹³ trays,⁹⁴ umbrellas,⁹⁵ walls,⁹⁶
 whistles,⁹⁷ windows,⁹⁸ wires,⁹⁹ move.¹⁰⁰

1.no angles, 2.no apples, 3.no arches, 4.no bags, 5.no basins, 6.no baskets, 7.no birds, 8.no boards, 9.no boats, 10.no boots,

11.no bottles, 12.no boxes, 13.no branches, 14.no bricks, 15.no brushes, 16.no cakes, 17.no cards, 18.no carriages, 19.no

cats, 20.no chests, 21.no clocks, 22.no coats, 23.no combs, 24.no cords, 25.no cushions, 26.no dogs, 27.no doors, 28.no

drawers, 29.no drops, 30.no ears, 31.no eggs, 32.no engines, 33.no farms, 34.no feathers, 35.no fish, 36.no flags, 37.no floors, 38.no forks, 39.no frames, 40.no gardens, 41.no gloves, 42.no goats, 43.no hair, 44.no hammers, 45.no hats, 46.no hooks, 47.no horns, 48.no houses, 49.no islands, 50.no jewels, 51.no kettles, 52.no keys, 53.no knives, 54.no leaves, 55.no legs, 56.no lines, 57.no locks, 58.no maps, 59.no matches, 60.no mouths, 61.no muscles, 62.no nails, 63.no necks, 64.no nets, 65.no offices, 66.no oranges, 67.no ovens, 68.no parcels, 69.no pins, 70.no pipes, 71.no planes, 72.no plates, 73.no pockets, 74.no pumps, 75.no rails, 76.no receipts, 77.no rings, 78.no rods, 79.no roofs, 80.no sails, 81.no scissors, 82.no seeds, 83.no shelves, 84.no ships, 85.no shirts, 86.no sponges, 87.no springs, 88.no stations, 89.no stems, 90.no sticks, 91.no stores, 92.no tables, 93.no threads, 94.no tickets, 95.no trains, 96.no trays, 97.no umbrellas, 98.no walls, 99.no whistles, 100.no windows, wires, move

“Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” is written in two prose blocks. Each block consists of the same 102 words, with the first 101 words being concrete and everyday. In the main text, after the first two words, indicators are attributed at a rate of one indicator per word, numbering one to one-hundred. Each footnote consists of the negation “no” and a word from the main text, one at a time in sequential order, beginning with “angles”. This system therefore means that the final footnote consists of the negation “no” and *three* nouns — “windows, wires, move”. The notes are structured asynchronously to the main body of text and shadow it. The words in both the main text and the footnotes are in alphabetic order.³⁷ Each footnote, as previously mentioned, is a concrete noun from the main text but written in negation. This would suggest *containment* if the indicators and footnotes were synchronised; they would in a sense be replicas and would not immediately suggest an external dialogue. But due to the foregrounding

³⁷ The last word is “move” which if treated as an abstract noun simply provides an anomaly. Yet if treated as a verb proposes all that has come before as something else, potentially verbs, some of them neologisms. “move” is of course out of alphabetic order, perhaps being a joke meaning ‘no move’ — i.e. with the awkward triplet x, y, z, and the exotic letters q and v, there are ‘no moves’ to be played out. There are of course lots of other readings.

of the defamiliarised structural elements — the negation and absence of synchronisation — the poem displays *distension*. This is to say that attention is drawn to structural elements because the poem looks as if it may be applying its indicators incorrectly. If the footnotes were synchronised correctly, as they at first appear to be, then they would not substantiate or offer supplementary information about the words in the text, other than to say that the body of the text is a lie (i.e. “Angles / no angles”). At first then “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” follows one minimalist trend — the attempt to write nothingness. However, if the notes are treated *verbatim* then the word in the main body of text — and its note — pair up to create combinations such as “Bag / no apples”, “Basins / no arches” and so on. Although transumption in terms of *distension* is probably still most strongly perceived, *distribution* also takes place as there are two signifiers which can play off each other. For example, we could say that there is a bag which has no apples in it.

In *stack* I attempt to take Acconci’s exploration of negation in “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” one step further in many of the ‘rocks’ lines and also in the line “jug¹” (10). In “jug¹” the footnote is empty and therefore it does not legitimately refer to anything. Negative signifiers, such as those in Acconci’s poem, discuss the non-existence of something, yet at the same time they allude to what the signifier negates.³⁸ In my more austere combination of the line “jug¹” and its blank footnote I attempt the impossible — to write a line that is read exclusively as containment, as self-reflexive. The line “jug¹” and its blank footnote are inspired by the Zen koan “Kicking Over the Water Jug” as recounted in Yamada’s commentary on 13th Century Zen koans in *The Gateless Gate* (2004). In the koan a master presents two monks with a jug who are told “You may not call this a water jug. What will you call it?” The first monk

³⁸ Image generation through negation is not new and is employed in many poems, famously for example in Shakespeare’s opening line to *Sonnet 130* “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”.

says, “It cannot be a wooden sandal.” The second monk, rather than talking, “kicked over the water jug and left” (189). In *The Gateless Gate* the commentary tells us that the second monk has given the correct answer; the first monk is incorrect as his answer is composed of the flawed tool that is language. Admittedly this reference is completely elusive to the reader of *stack* as a standalone poem, yet my hope is that some of the mood of the koan filters through when read without the critical essay.

A contrasting use of footnotes to *stack* can be found in the novel *Mezzanine* (1988) by Nicholson Baker. According to the blurb the novel “is the story of one man’s lunch hour”. *Mezzanine* uses footnotes on many of its pages, only using the indicator “¹” — as *stack* does in all but one instance — as if to say ‘now it’s time to read the footnote’. The use of the same indicator number also alerts the reader to the text’s antithetical structure with regards to the conventional use of footnotes, which, in both *stack* and in *Mezzanine*, suggests a lack of narrative movement. However, using footnotes in such a way means that in *Mezzanine* footnotes are significantly longer than the sentences in the main text to which they refer: many come to dominate the page. The use of long footnotes reaches its zenith on page sixty-four where the footnote runs over four pages. After the footnote is read — by page sixty-eight — the reader must return to page sixty-four to continue with the main text. Baker’s footnotes take to the limit Dworkin’s assertion that to note is “to observe closely” (60). As Baker points out, in an interview with the web magazine *AltX*: “people read every imaginable way you could do it. Skipping the text. Reading the footnotes first. I wanted it to be optional.” Whilst I want people to opt in to the way that footnotes are used I don’t want them to be skipped or optional. By applying indicators and footnotes of such brevity, which have roughly the same word count as the line, I hope that the combined relationship is intensified. If one chooses to read the footnote in *Mezzanine* we leave the body of the text for so long that the body and the footnote

are no longer closely bound. The approach in texts that use long footnotes, such as *Mezzanine*, is not one to which I'm antithetical. However, this approach to footnotes provides a useful comparison to the one I have taken in *stack*. In *stack* the indicators and their footnotes are essentially of equal weighting — being the same font size and around the same word count. Therefore, the footnotes in *stack* do not encourage “skipping the text” in the same way as a text like *Mezzanine*. However, one can imagine the footnotes in *stack* being perceived as providing no additional information and ‘skipped’ for that reason and no doubt others.³⁹

Footnotes in *stack* are also intended to work as a release (or relief) from the body of the poem — this is my experience of reading *stack* and other texts which use creative footnotes sparingly. One such text is Peter Manson's *Adjunct: an Undigest* (2004). Manson's text is a volume-length poem, full of jokes, a block of text, which uses a New Sentence approach to writing, meaning that the reading process is intense and there are no obvious places to ‘dwell’. However, in the poem Manson includes four sentences which are footnoted. The first combination is unexpected, as it occurs almost halfway through the book. The sentence in the body of text reads “Margaux Hemmingway is dead.¹” — “is dead” is a recurring motif/joke in the poem. The footnote, also a joke, creates slowness due to its position as a (rare) footnote — “Note: Deluxe Volume – Available only to biographees, the book will be bound in rich leather with gold embellishments – a handsome addition to any library” (37). The poem ends on page seventy-six. The other three footnotes have a similar structural role in terms of the way the page is read and appear on pages forty-four, forty-eight and sixty-six. The use of these footnotes suggests that there may be more to follow, or that some sort of pattern is emerging and

³⁹ There are a number of other fictional works which include large indexical structures, which provide challenges quite different from *stack* such as the fictions *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski (2000) and Nabakov's *Pale Fire* (2010).

encourages the reader examine the poem at a cross-referential level manifesting additional dwelling. However, after these three notes no more appear.

5.2: REPETITION

For the purposes of cross-referencing, lines which are repeated, or nearly repeated, are often separated by reasonably large intervals in order to encourage indeterminacy. Since the repetitions are so far apart I would suggest that it is hard at a glance to decide whether they are duplicates or ‘shadows’. One may feel as if they have read lines previously when often the line is a variation. A single variation of course changes the meaning completely whilst retaining a significant family resemblance. For example, the line “i asked a friend if i could push him for a plum” is repeated twice (81, 86) Variations occur — “i asked a friend if i could push him by a plum” (87), “i asked a friend if i could push her for a plum” (88), “i asked a friend if i could push him as a plum” (91) and “i asked a friend if i could push him with a plum” (102). Other references to plums occur such as: “table with no plum” (57), “this plum starts here by this fir tree” (89), “a plum atop a lidded tub” (94) and “a tub full of plums” (107).

In Silliman’s *Ketjak* sentences are repeated systematically rather than through intuition, emulating the structure of the music of the Balinese ‘Ketjak’ chant as well as the work of the minimalist composer Steve Reich. Silliman notes that using repetition in a systematic way gives “an overall impression of unity” (*The New Sentence* 92). *Ketjak* comprises twelve stanzas whose sentences double from one to two, from two to four, all the way up to 2048. Each new stanza consists of all the sentences from the previous stanza (sometimes with minor variations) and a matching number of new sentences. As Silliman notes, in an interview with Sidna Gregory available at the website *Modern American Poetry*, “one way to think of ‘Ketjak’ is to imagine putting one sentence on one square of a checkerboard, two on the next, four on the

next and so forth.” *Ketjak*, although epic, only makes it twelve squares into the sixty-four of the “checkerboard” but predicts the kind of creative writing that computers can make nowadays. The proximity of the first stanza’s sole sentence “Revolving Doors” to the repetition of the sentence in stanza two and three is clearly prominent acoustically and graphologically:

Revolving door.

Revolving door. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

Revolving door. Fountains of the financial district. Houseboats beached at the point of low tide, only to float again when the sunset is reflected in the water. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, camels pulling wagons of bear cages, tamed ostriches in toy hats, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

However, when we get to the final three stanzas — 512, 1024 and 2048 sentences long — the amount of time it takes to read them means that the likelihood of remembering repetitions has decreased. At this stage repetition becomes subliminal and hypnotic like the Balinese chant, leading to a sense of *déjà vu*. As already mentioned, in *stack* I spread repetitions far apart *without* system, such as the line “white green blue” (9, 10,104), which has its variations such as “green white blue” (9, 11, 105) and so on. Lines such as these are inspired by sentences from *Ketjak* such as “Soap.” (6, 13, 19, 31, 58). When I first read *Ketjak* I thought that the similar sentences “Soap dish.” (33, 56) and “Soap root.” (79) were variations yet nevertheless still structural repetitions on “Soap” and were therefore the ‘same’ sentence. When investigating

the poem however I discovered that these two sentences were in fact completely new lines due to their position within the poem's structure.

In *stack* I took inspiration from many poems in which themes and methods are repeated and presented as collage. Grenier's *Sentences* is indicative of this process. When I first read the collection it was my immediate inclination to group the poems by type. Silliman also took this approach when *Sentences* was first published. In his essay "Sentences" he notes cross-referential connections between the poems and by "simply piling the cards into what seems to be the fewest intelligible groupings" arrives "at 16 types" (*The New Sentence* 169). Silliman's list, here paraphrased, is composed of three sets — compositional modes: one-word pieces, words running together, two-word pieces, three-word pieces, studies of balance. Investigation modes: individual quotations, discussions, pieces setting off the discursive function, I-pieces, multiple statements. Mixed modes: titles which oppose texts, studies of imbalance, completed statements, errata, the graphemic. The list of themes and methods in *stack* is similar: one-word poems, I-pieces, footnoted words, appropriated text, repeated and elliptical sentences, the graphemic, domestic and everyday situations, absurdity, walking, other types of 'intervention', quantitative statements, colours, art works, and so on. Because many of the categories in Silliman's taxonomy are arrived at easily *Sentences* suggests that there are more categories to be made — in fact the discovery of linkages is part of the joy of reading it. In *Sentences* the impetus to conduct taxonomical readings, I would moot, is suggested more heavily than they are in *stack* — the result of the index cards overtly suggesting 500 discrete poems.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

My two key research aims have been fulfilled. The first of those can be considered as having two parts, the first being 'to create an original minimalist poem.' *stack* exemplifies the

development of my own poetic practice in the selection, combination and invention of minimalist approaches. I have now provided readers and scholars with a broader understanding of how advances in minimalist poetic practice might be made, and have become more adept in my craft. As a result of my research I have also written a number of other minimalist poems. Some of these take a different approach to *stack* whilst others adapt the methods described in the critical essay.⁴⁰ The second part of this initial aim was that *stack* should be ‘illuminated by a critical essay that offers a thorough review of the methodologies that were undertaken.’ When I began my research I had a rough idea of the creative methodologies that I intended to use. Yet I also discovered and refined some of them along the way, through a combination of creative practice and library-based research. Furthermore, as I intended, the critical essay is clear and offers insight into the approaches and implications of the creative methodologies I have taken.

My second research aim was ‘to produce a framework for a particular strand of minimalist poetry in which *stack* is included.’ As I knew, before I commenced my research, no *ism* can be entirely honed to a specific set of attributes, because it will include a gamut of practices where fuzzy edges are rife. However, the greater majority of poems that have been referred to in this critical essay share a common totality of attributes that have been used in an original manner in *stack*. It has been useful therefore to label such practice in order that similar poems may be considered in conjunction. Moreover, the label ‘minimalist poetry’ seems highly apt in general since the poems that I have examined in my research use short lines — or sentences — and additionally tend to use simple language; as I demonstrate in my thesis, these

⁴⁰ For example, I have written a sequence of ten snowball poems: a ten-line poem which increases in size, like a snowball rolling down a hill, where the first line consists of one word or syllable, the second two, the third three and so on.

distinctive features are characteristic of much (although not all) minimalist poetry. Also, the strong family resemblance of minimalist poetics to minimalist art — a resemblance that I have elaborated on in Chapter 1 and elsewhere — warrants the term's application. It may be that future researchers wish to distinguish between different types of minimalisms, offering a wide range of names, yet this is certainly the work of another thesis.⁴¹ Overall, therefore, the creative portfolio and the critical essay have achieved what I intended — to create and define a specific type of minimalist poetic practice, examine its attributes and explore how these can be adapted so that original minimalist poetry may be made.

Throughout my research I have been in dialogue with a range of practitioners, academics and students, friends, family and strangers. These discussions have taken place through a variety of mediums including: teaching, conferences, seminars, poetry readings and publications, as well as formal and informal conversations, on and off-line. Some of these conversations have certainly encouraged others to take an interest in minimalist poetry. It is my hope that the thesis will prove useful to future researchers and indeed anybody else with an interest. Finally, the PhD allowed me to compose *stack* for publication in book form. After my research was complete the poem was published by Carcanet press and represents another valuable research tool in the field of minimalist poetics and beyond.

⁴¹ Grumann begins this approach in his short essay "MNMLST POETRY".

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